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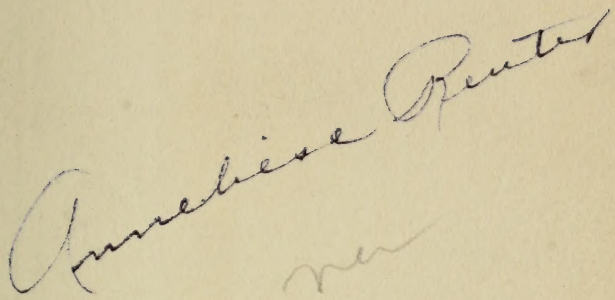

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BY

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CHAPTER I

It was in early January of a certain year that a cheery hunting centre obtained most undesirable prominence in the crime-annals of Scotland Yard and placarded various well-known names in all the sensational newspapers.

During the memory of man no such thing had ever happened in that select neighbourhood; nothing like it would ever, probably, happen again. Not only Danesthorpe, but the whole of Mershire wondered and conjectured and suspected and championed . . . And only one man knew, and held his tongue; and will hold it to the end. When they bury him eventually in Danesthorpe Churchyard, one fancies that his ghost, foregathering for the first time with its neighbours and predecessors, will chuckle sardonically.

But this was some months before, a cold January afternoon. The mist had stolen up suddenly, blotting out distant objects like an intangible blanket. Not an hour ago, the leafless branches of the trees, seen over the high wall that bordered one side of the road leading from Danesthorpe village, had been sharply etched against the sky. Now a wraith-like film blurred them.

Two people on horseback—a man and a girl—were riding side by side down that long straight road. They were riding slowly, in the silence born of comfortable

weariness, but the jingle of bit and creak of leather brought a cheerful note of activity into the muffled stillness around them. The man's hunt coat struck a warm splash of colour against the mist-veiled greys and browns of the winter landscape. He swung his crop and cracked it idly, but the horses made no effort to quicken their measured walk. Both had been ridden pretty nearly to a standstill; and their paces would only quicken at the welcome sight of their own stables.

As they drew level with a tall narrow green door set in the brick wall, the man pulled up suddenly and dismounted.

"May as well save the extra mile," he said, throwing the reins to his companion.

She nodded. A big, fair girl, riding astride, with a long stirrup. Her dark grey coat and breeches were smartly cut and workmanlike, and she sat well down in her saddle, her supple figure swaying easily to the movement of the horse.

Their two mounts stood quietly enough, while the man fumbled with the latch of the door; both heads drooped, their damp-streaked sides steamed through the mist.

"Damn!" he said suddenly and explosively. "The infernal door's locked."

"Locked? What an odd thing!" the girl exclaimed. "I'd never even noticed that there was a keyhole."

"There wasn't." He was staring at the door with an expression that hovered between surprise and exasperation. "The lock's been put on quite lately. Pretty sickening, what?"

"Oh, well!" She straightened her limp back with an attempt at briskness. "I suppose it isn't everybody who cares for their neighbours taking short cuts across their grounds. After all, that path brings you right in sight of the house."

"What the hell does that matter?" The young man's tone was decidedly truculent. He was prepared to vent his annoyance about that locked door on anyone who presumed to consider the locking of it a reasonable proposition. He had the colouring that indicates a choleric temperament—reddish hair and sanguine complexion and the red-brown eye that flames hotly. One could see the likeness between him and the girl—they were clearly brother and sister; the kinship showed both in their big build and boldly-cut features and the crisp, resonant tones of their voices. But Ruth Aylmer's shingled waves were fair rather than red, her eyes were clear, soft grey, and her expression serene almost to placidity. "Why the hell *should* it matter?" he repeated. "Old Karslake never minded."

"No; but then he knew us all so well," she protested mildly. "One must expect it to be different now that the place belongs to someone else."

"Rot!" Her brother's interjection was terse and scantly polite. "*Utter* rot! I call it a damned unneighbourly thing to do, and I can't see the point in it, either."

"Perhaps it's a mistake," the girl suggested. "Someone may have locked it without thinking."

"A mistake!" He echoed her words contemptuously. "Haven't I told you that the lock's been put on lately? Locks aren't screwed on to doors by mistake, are they?"

She gave it up, serenely ignoring his irascibility.

"I suppose not; and I don't much care, anyhow. I want my tea. For goodness' sake, my dear boy, don't waste any more time, but come on."

He turned unwillingly away, and had swung himself into the saddle when footsteps which had been coming down the road behind them, quickened, and a voice hailed them.

"That you, Bevis? Hold on a bit . . . I'll let you in."

The speaker loomed through the mist close to them—a broad-shouldered man of middle height, wearing ancient but well-cut tweeds and a cap whose peak was pulled down over a square, tanned face.

The eyes which his cap shaded were of the lightest, serenest blue—eyes which nearly always held a twinkle and a shrewd perceptiveness at the back of their ingenuous serenity. His eyebrows were quizzically raised as though in perpetual, amused surprise at the vagaries of his friends, and his clean-shaven mouth had a crooked little twist, infinitesimal, yet giving character to its firm, good-tempered lines.

He pulled a key out of one of his capacious pockets and inserted it in the lock against which Bevis had been raging.

"Had a good day?" he inquired cheerfully.

"Topping," the girl answered him. "We found at Woddering Gorst and ran him right over to Belchurch."

He held the door open for her and she passed through, stooping low over her horse's neck to clear the top of the door. Aylmer followed her.

"Why weren't you out, Nick?" he asked.

The other man made a little grimace as he walked on with them. Before them a narrow path, matted with dead leaves which muffled the sound of the horses' hoofs, led through a belt of trees to the open slopes of the park.

"Kestrel's lame," he said briefly, "and Sparrow-hawk's coughing."

"Oh, what a pity!" Ruth exclaimed. "Didn't Mr. Karslake know? He might have mounted you, surely, from that stableful of his?"

Juan Karslake's cousin and estate agent shrugged his shoulders. "I don't suppose he knows how many horses I keep," he said good-humouredly. "I certainly haven't bothered to tell him. He probably thinks I can afford a

string of hunters as well as the next man." He spoke in an amused, detached sort of voice. "Hasn't much idea of the cost of living and sport generally in England these days; new to it all, you see."

"New? I should say he is!" Bevis Aylmer interposed disgustedly. "I say, Nickie, what's the great idea of all this bolt and bar business?"

He jerked his crop backwards in the direction of the door which the other had closed and re-locked before walking on.

Nicholas Storrington laughed.

"Hanged if I know," he said. "Karslake asked me to have it done, and told me to keep a key for my own use. The big gates are locked too. Old Owen is kept running in and out of the lodge far more busily than he used to be."

"Good Lord!" said Aylmer. "Is he mad?"

Storrington grinned.

"I don't think so," he said. "The customs of the English landed proprietor—rights of way and old-established privileges and so forth—are bound to seem a bit odd to a fellow with his foreign upbringing. It's not his fault and it's not my business to interfere. We get on quite well together on the whole, he and I."

"You'd get on with anybody, Nick," Ruth said affectionately.

She was very fond of the man who was trudging briskly along at her horse's shoulder, his hands in his pockets. And she was acutely sorry for him.

The Aylmers had known Nicholas Storrington since the days when he had been a cheery public-school boy, and they had been small noisy imps of children to whom he had been good-humouredly indulgent.

His father had been agent to the Danesthorpe Hall Estate before him. His mother had been the orphan

niece of the late owner. And since old Robert Karslake had seemed to have no nearer relations, it had been tacitly assumed that Nick Storrington would be his heir. Everyone had taken it for granted that when the old man died, Nicholas would move up from his own modest dwelling, hidden away among the trees in a corner of the park, to take possession of the big solid ugly old house which was faintly visible in the distance as they came out into the open where the ground was higher and the mist not so thick.

But when old Robert died and the will was read, it was found that he had left practically everything to another great-nephew whom no one had ever seen or heard of.

Robert himself had been the middle one of three brothers. The younger had died, leaving one daughter —Nick's mother. The elder had quarrelled with his father, a narrow-minded autocrat; had been disinherited, gone abroad and cut himself completely adrift from his family. It now appeared that, secretly, Robert had always blamed himself for the share he had played in the events that led to his elder brother's disinheritance, and he probably didn't blame himself unduly. A not too scrupulous strain had shown itself before now in previous generations of the family. Invalided, unmarried, a recluse towards the end of a long life, he had brooded over this knowledge. Lately it seemed that he had employed agents to trace his disinherited brother; they had advertised for the whereabouts of any child or grandchild of John Geoffrey Karslake, who had left England in 1865. The advertisement had brought a response from some remote part of the world, where it had penetrated by an odd chance.

John Geoffrey was dead; and that branch of the family was represented by his solitary grandson. When Robert himself died shortly after, it was found that he

had made unexpected reparation to his dead brother through this young man.

Danesthorpe Hall and practically everything that went with it passed to the unknown great-nephew, while Nick Storrington received a comparatively small legacy and the heartfelt sympathy of all his friends; and they were many.

He warded it off with a whimsical lift of his eyebrows and a little twisted smile. He might be feeling pretty hard hit, but that was his own business; and old Robert's disposition of his property had been no one else's either. No man ever took so hard a knock more gallantly than Nick Storrington. There was no humbug about him; no cant phrases of philosophy. Just that silent shrug, that flicker in his steady blue eyes, of wry laughter at himself and his expectations. *Finis*. Here he was, still agent for the Danesthorpe Hall Estate, still living in the little old Georgian building known as the Dower House, from whose windows he could catch a glimpse through the trees of the grandeur that might have been his. The trio approached it presently, after they had crossed the main drive at a point where a narrower track struck into it from the other side. This track they followed, and it led them to the Dower House. A spaniel and a retriever rushed out barking, from behind the tall privet hedge, to greet their master.

"That young dog of yours turning out well?" Aylmer asked.

He wasn't sorry to get right away from the subject of Juan Karslake. It had begun to irritate him lately. He told himself that it was entirely on Nick's account that so many things connected with the new owner of Danesthorpe Hall were beginning to get on his nerves; and he ignored the fact that the latest cause of offence—the barring of the short cut through the park—was hardly to be resented on Nick's behalf, since he had his own key.

"Quite promising," Storrington said, perfunctorily caressing the retriever's head, "though he's a bit wild still. I had him out the other day, but he disgraced himself pretty badly—kept on running in—and had to be beaten. My respected cousin seemed to think that I was being unnecessarily severe. As a matter of fact I *was* rather fed-up with the little brute."

Aylmer uttered an impatient exclamation.

"What does he know about training sporting dogs, or about sport at all, anyway?" he demanded with huge contempt.

"Not much about sport in England, perhaps," the other conceded. "But he's a first-class shot, and you won't deny that he can sit a horse;—most horses, I should say."

"He can pay the price of a made hunter, if that's what you mean."

Bevis' grudging admission was interrupted impatiently by his sister.

"Oh, my dear Bevis! Haven't we worn the subject of Mr. Karslake rather threadbare? One would think he had only just arrived in the neighbourhood, instead of having been settled down among us for—surely it's six months, isn't it?"

"Seven calendar months yesterday," Storrington said. "To-day's the third of January, and he arrived on the second of June last year. I remember the date because it was Clover Willoughby's birthday and I had to leave The Firs in the middle of a set of tennis to go and meet him at the station."

Ruth bit her lip.

There was a faint touch of the mischievously malicious in Nick Storrington's make-up, cropping up occasionally through his good nature. He was prone to tease and annoy his friends as a schoolboy might, only in a more deliberate, experimental fashion than a schoolboy is

usually urged by. In this instance, however, it was clear that he was only being unusually tactless.

Why remind Bevis of that particular fact just now? Why remind him of Clover Willoughby at all? Ruth flicked her boot with her hunting crop and glanced disconsolately from the big, scowling young man to his older and more philosophical friend. She sighed a little. The advent of Juan Karslake, claiming both the Danesthorpe estates, and the interest—friendly or otherwise—of most of his new neighbours by reason of that curious little suggestion of reticence and mystery that clung about him —had undoubtedly upset the lives of both these two men pretty badly.

"Come in and have tea," Storrington said.

She shook her head.

"No, thanks, Nick. The Skipper's hard at work designing the scenery for the theatricals, and he's promised to come round this evening and show me the sketch for the second act. We want Anderson to get to work as soon as possible. He can't do anything till he's got the sketches and the measurements."

"How are the rehearsals going on?" Storrington asked.

"Damn badly," Bevis said, with all the cheerfulness of one who wasn't personally concerned in the matter. "Barring your cousin," he made the admission grudgingly, "and the Skipper, the only one of the crowd who's got any idea of acting is Angela, and she won't take the trouble, half the time."

"No, that's true," his sister assented. There was an odd note in her voice. Didn't he realise, she wondered, that Lady Angela Vyse's performance was only half-hearted when *he* was present because on those occasions she never gave her whole attention to her part? Were all men as crassly blind? Or was it merely that they always

valued what was out of their reach, and were equally indifferent to what was obviously theirs for the taking?

The brother and sister rode on past Storrington's house, and out into the road again through big folding doors which he unlocked for them.

But when they had vanished in the mist, and the sound of their horses' hoofs had ceased to echo in hollow fashion on the hard road, he still stood leaning against the doorpost, staring after them. His blue eyes were intent and steady, as if concentrated on something invisible. His face was set in rather grim lines.

Presently he turned, whistled in the two dogs, relocked the doors, and went back up the path to the little gate in the hedge that secured him privacy for his own domains. He crossed the strip of lawn and paused at a narrow entry leading into a stable yard, where a spare, elderly man in shirt-sleeves was busy with a mop and pail.

"How's your patient, Martin? I went in to see him after lunch, but he was sound asleep, poor beggar."

The man touched his forelock.

"Doin' nicely, sir; 'e's slep' all the afternoon, I believe. The missus, she reckons 'e'll be up and about in a week or so."

"Hope he's not being too much trouble to her," Storrington said. "Of course I know the orthodox thing would have been to send the poor chap on to the Cottage hospital . . ."

"Bless your heart, sir, no!" Martin's grin was amiability itself. He had been groom to Nick's father, and while he quite realised that most people wouldn't have saddled themselves with the luckless pedestrian who had met with an accident not forty yards from their own door, he was equally aware that to do anything else would have been utterly at variance with "Mr. Nick's" characteristic philanthropy. Martin took that philanthropy as much for

granted as Storrington's thoughtful solicitude for the extra trouble which it was giving to his housekeeper. "Bless you, no, sir," he repeated. "The missus, she's as pleased as Punch, 'avin' somethin' to fuss over. And now 'e's left off ravin' in a furrin language and come to 'is senses like, 'e seems a decent, civil-spoken young chap. What kind o' furriner might 'e be, Mr. Nicholas? We 'aven't liked not to bother 'im with questions."

"Belgian," Storrington said. "I asked him yesterday. But it isn't a lingo I'm familiar with. Might be Flemish or Walloon."

"Ah." Martin looked wiser than he felt.

"He tells me," the other went on, "that he was a war refugee, and stayed on after peace was signed, in a job he'd got as combined groom and chauffeur to some people in Crewe. Last year his employers sold their house and went abroad, and he hung about trying to get another job, till all his savings were gone. He says he was on the tramp to Hull, to find a compatriot who's doing well, there; but he lost his way."

" 'Aven't no sense of direction, furriners." Martin swung his pail and sent the water streaming over the brick pavement of the yard.

" 'Ull," he repeated slowly. "Should say 'e 'ad lost it and no error."

He set to work vigorously with his mop, and Storrington went on indoors.

As he entered the square, low-ceilinged hall, the neat little maid who helped Mrs. Martin with the housework was carrying his tea into the smoking-room. The door which led to the kitchen regions was open and he could hear Mrs. Martin clattering dishes in the distance. After a moment's hesitation he went on up the dark, shallow stairs, across the landing and down a passage, off which opened the servants' bedrooms. At the door of one of

these he knocked perfunctorily and entered upon the heels of his knock.

It was a small room, plainly furnished, with a cheerful little fire burning in the grate. The man who was lying in a narrow bed by the window turned his head at Storrington's entrance in a swift startled fashion that had something queerly defensive about it. The white sheets of the bed and the linen bandage wound about the close-cropped bullet head emphasized the sallowness of his clean-shaven face and the darkness of his deep-set eyes.

"Feeling better? That's right." Storrington came up and stood beside the bed. "We'll have you on your feet again soon, my lad," he said.

The invalid's effusive gratitude was spoken with only the barest trace of a foreign accent, if any. He was very sorry to have put the gentleman to so much trouble . . . he was afraid that it would be a few days before he could continue his journey to Hull . . .

"Rather more than that, my housekeeper says," Storrington corrected him, smiling. "But she's an excellent nurse; you couldn't have fallen into better hands in the whole of Danesthorpe." He waited a moment or two as though expecting the patient to make some comment, but the man lay silent under the thoughtful gaze of the blue eyes whose keen expression often belied the easy smile on his lips.

Presently seeing that the patient wasn't inclined to be any more communicative about himself than he had been so far, Storrington left him with a few encouraging remarks and went downstairs again.

For a few moments after he had gone, the man lay quite still, listening, until the sound of his visitor's footsteps had died away and the house was quiet. His eyes rested with a feverish eagerness on the shabby deal chest of drawers at the foot of his bed, where a little pile of

clothes lay neatly folded—his own clothes which Mrs. Martin had taken away to brush and clean after the accident and had only brought back to-day. He had waked from a long sleep just a moment or two before Storrington came in, to see them lying there.

He hadn't dared ask for them before; and he *must* see—it was essential that he should know—whether a certain important piece of paper was still in his inside coat pocket, or whether he had dropped it at the time of his accident. He knew that he had taken it out to refer to, just before the big motor van loomed up out of the mist—a mist similar to this afternoon's—and struck him down. The rest was a blank. Had he put it back, or had he still been holding it when he was knocked unconscious?

He would be safe now for a little while, he thought, from any more interruptions. Slowly and with much difficulty he raised himself, first to a sitting posture, and then, pulling aside the bedclothes, lowered his feet to the ground. His head ached and throbbed with the change of position; he felt stiff and bruised all over. Weak, too—cursedly weak. He had to sit there for a moment or two, to fight down his giddiness; then he rose, holding on to the bed and dragged himself slowly towards the chest of drawers. Arrived there, he hung on to it, panting, until he had recovered sufficiently to thrust trembling fingers into the inside pocket of the shabby brown tweed coat that lay on the top of the little pile. The pocket was empty. He withdrew his groping fingers, shaking all over, and muttered an oath under his breath—an oath which, while the gist of it was indigenous to most Christian countries, was voiced neither in the inferior French which obtains in Belgium, nor in Walloon or Flemish.

Stay, there were still the outside pockets, though he had

never kept it in one of those; the inside one was safer. However, in an absentminded moment he might . . .

For the second time his anxious fingers groped, and this time with success. They drew out a folded and much creased sheet of paper which he fumblingly opened. Yes, there was no mistake about it; it was in the wrong pocket, but it was what he sought. He flattened it out on the top of the chest of drawers and stared at it hungrily. A twelve-inch map of this particular district, very carefully drawn, with the site of Danesthorpe Hall and the name of its owner, Juan Karslake, marked upon it in red ink. In red ink, too, had evidently been impressed the curious stamp in the top left-hand corner—the impress of two thumbs, their whorls clearly marked, and beneath them a narrow scroll inscribed with two Latin words "Pollice verso."

He must have put it into that pocket by mistake. Or perhaps the housekeeper had found it, taken it out while she brushed the coat and replaced it wrongly. Had she looked at it, he wondered anxiously? Well, if she had, she would be sure to betray that fact sooner or later. Feminine curiosity would hardly rest without probing him to try and discover what it meant. Danesthorpe was well off the road to Hull. Why had he said "Hull" at all? It had been the first town that came into his head, he supposed. He would have to invent some plausible explanation. Meanwhile . . .

Three minutes later, the torn fragments of that sheet of paper were blazing merrily in the fire, and shortly afterwards the soi-disant Albert Bonnin, a Belgian refugee who apostrophised his maker in fluent Spanish, was lying back on his pillows, his eyes closed, breathing heavily.

CHAPTER II

THOUGH Danesthorpe Hall was undoubtedly one of the largest houses in the neighbourhood, the Manor, which had belonged to the Aylmers since the sixteenth century, was by far the oldest.

The original founder of the Danesthorpe estate had been a wealthy merchant who had owned plantations in the West Indies, had retired from his business in 1750, married into a county family and built the Hall as an appropriate setting for a youthful bride.

There was a certain dignity about the massive white building with its many windows and becolumned façade, and its great stone urns flanking the various broad flights of steps that led up to the porticoed hall door and to the terraced lawns and gardens. But the charm of the old grey manor was denied to it. Danesthorpe Hall spoke of money and position; the Manor breathed stirring whispers of romance and history. Political plots had been hatched in the panelled dining room at the Manor, where glasses that were raised to toast "the King" had been silently passed across the finger bowls; rebels against the ruling powers had found a refuge here. The Aylmers were essentially a turbulent, fighting race, and few insurgent movements had passed them by. Wyatt's rising had engulfed them, Monmouth's rebellion had lured them away from the Shires into the West Country; and until the firm establishment of the Hanoverian line had turned loyalty to the Stuart cause into a futile, graceful gesture, they had been ardent Jacobites. The broad acres which they had once owned had been diminished by fines and

confiscations; and when part of the Manor had been accidentally destroyed by fire in George IV's Reign, it had never been re-built. The ruins had been levelled down into lawns and flower-beds; and as the Manor stood now, it was only a moderate-sized country house, but exceedingly beautiful and picturesque still.

Bevis Aylmer, the present owner, farmed what was left of the land, not so much because he was obliged to, but because he liked doing it; and bringing to the job all the surplus energy which his forebears had dissipated in forlorn causes, he made a very good thing out of it.

His sister shared his tastes; and the two hunted and shot and enjoyed most country sports together. Mrs. Aylmer, a gentle, rather shadowy woman, was far happier in her widowhood, alone with the son and daughter who petted and teased and tyrannized over her affectionately, than she had ever been with her husband. She was the sort of woman who ought to have married the mildest of conventional curates, and she had married instead a headstrong, sport-loving country squire, whose fiery temper was a bye-word in the county.

His passionate wooing had swept her off her feet, only to discover, too late, that what had seemed at first merely the romantic thrill awakened in her by the conquering lover, was resolving itself into a nervous terror of the man's cyclonic personality.

In many respects her son Bevis was a replica of his father, but even when under the influence of the traditional Aylmer temper he didn't alarm her in the same way. He had been her baby once, with little soft clutching fingers and unsteady feet—all hers to do as she pleased with—the tiny helpless bundle that had grown into a magnificent young Hercules. And to a mother, the grown up man is still the baby—*her* baby; seen through the other end of life's telescope.

Ruth, on the other hand, had inherited her mother's placidity, tempered with the Aylmer readiness to be always up and doing. Full of good-tempered energy, she was one of those people who are invariably appealed to in emergencies and on special occasions. Ruth Aylmer never "let you down," and what was more, she thoroughly enjoyed the spade-work which most gaiety lovers shirk.

It was Lady Angela Vyse who was responsible in the first instance for the idea of getting up theatricals in aid of the Village Clubroom; but the organising of the whole affair fell to Ruth. When Lady Angela had decided on the play to be acted and chosen the caste, her enthusiasm waned a little. Particularly after she discovered that no power on earth could persuade Bevis Aylmer to learn even the smallest part that would necessitate his attending rehearsals. She had, however, promised to help with the painting of the scenery; and the week after Nicholas Storrington had walked with the Aylmers through Danesthorpe park, scene painting was in full swing in the old tithe barn at the Manor.

It was an amazingly picturesque and useful building—the Manor House barn. It had been put, of recent years, to almost every possible use except its original one. Village concerts were given here, and school-treat teas and sales of work. There was a stage at one end of it, looking at the present moment as indescribably forlorn as only a dismantled stage can look; with its bare boards, its blank and dusty footlights, its flies nakedly exposed, and an aged back cloth hung all awry.

This morning the whole barn smelt of paint and of the hot size that steamed over a small brazier.

Ruth Aylmer, in a short, faded blue linen overall that emphasised her fresh colouring and length of limb, was thoughtfully comparing the sketch in her hand with a towering erection of canvas propped against the wall. It

was stretched over a wooden frame shaped to represent a tower archway and roughly outlined for painting in uneven squares that represented blocks of stone.

The village carpenter, an alert little wizened man stood beside her, anxiously awaiting her verdict.

"Couldn't have been better, Dawes," she said approvingly. "The only question is—about that arch, now. Are you quite certain it's high enough? Mr. Karslake has to make a dramatic entry through it, and the effect will be spoilt if the poor man has to duck."

Dawes measured the archway with a practised eye.

"I'd say it was all of five foot eleven inches, Miss Ruth," he said, "and Mr. Karslake, he'll not be that, I reckon."

"God bless my soul, no!" A loud cheerful voice interrupted them. Its owner was stout and middle-aged, with "retired naval officer" written large all over him. Captain Lindham, unlike most stout men, was neither smug nor sloppy; he carried his corpulence briskly and clothed it immaculately. Even in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat, brandishing a huge palette and a sheaf of brushes, he didn't lack a breezy quarterdeck dignity; and since he was genuinely something of an artist, with a certain amount of experience in this branch of the art, he was at present in autocratic command of the tithe barn and all its occupants.

"M'dear girl," he expostulated, "what height do you take the feller to be? One would think you had Bevis in your mind's eye."

She laughed, watching him splash the paint on to his own piece of scenery with broad strokes that were astonishingly effective.

"If I had," she said, "I might also rely on the whole show being an utter frost. Bevis can't act for toffee, bless him!" Her tone was affectionately indulgent. "Whereas

even Lady Angela declares that Mr. Karslake is the best amateur she's ever met."

"I expect he is," Lindham remarked tersely. "He's half a foreigner. Nick says his grandmother was Spanish. All Dagoes can act; and it always gets you women," he added, as he stepped back a pace or two to survey his work. Then:

"Where is the alluring widow?" he asked. "I thought she'd signed on for a morning's work, and it's nearly twelve now."

"Oh, she's always late," Ruth said philosophically. "Don't grouse, Skipper. Aren't you satisfied with the way Clover and Nickie over there are slapping on lights and shadows like little rays of sunshine?"

He retorted that he never said he wasn't, after his usual habit of turning conversations into sparring matches. "And what's more," he added resignedly, "I don't suppose the Vyse minx would be much use at anything beyond decorating her own wicked little face."

"Well, really!" the girl laughed. "You're horribly uncharitable to-day, Skipper. Gout, is it? or just mid-Victorianism and insular prejudice?"

He shook his fistful of brushes at her, but he didn't defend himself. There *was* a touch of Victorianism about him, and he was proud of it. The blatancy of modern manners and make-up met with his strong disapproval. He had never got quite accustomed to the way in which the post-war generation turns the whole world into its dressing room, and the most casual conversation into a dissecting table for indecently intimate emotions. In his day, Lady Angela Vyse, rightly or wrongly, would have been considered a "fast little baggage."

The charge of insularity, however, he would have strongly denied; he considered himself quite broad-minded in that respect. Nevertheless he let the accusa-

tion pass unchallenged. If a man with Spanish blood in him wasn't a Dago, what the devil was he? And since he *was* a Dago, wasn't it an outrageous miscarriage of justice that he should also be an English landed proprietor, to the exclusion of a thundering good chap like Nicholas Storrington?

At the other end of the barn, Storrington himself, in a gaily coloured sweater and plus fours, was working on a section of canvas wall and turret, in company with the most sought after young woman in the neighbourhood. That was typical of Storrington, so most men would have said; and oddly enough not one of them would have borne him any grudge on that score. There was a cheery inconsequence and impersonality about his *rôle* of universal counsellor, friend and adorer that disarmed criticism and jealousy. No one ever suspected him of serious intentions with regard to Clover Willoughby or to anyone else.

Yet Nick Storrington had cherished such intentions once, unknown even to Clover herself; but he had realized very soon that he stood no more chance with her than had the other lovelorn swains who had sighed for that attractive and unimpressionable young woman in vain. And he wasn't the kind of man who would ever have risked cutting an undignified figure in his friends' eyes, by sharing the *rôle* of unwelcome suitor with so many men younger than himself. If the prospects he had once relied on had materialized, he would have had something to offer that *might* have dazzled her fancy. So he had hoped. His impression of her as the young Diana, imperious, virginal, cold as yet to any hint of passion, wasn't inconsistent with such a hope. But luck—and an old man's tardy remorse—had been against him; and Clover had never known.

There was nothing of the flirt in Clover Willoughby.

It wasn't her fault that the gods had given her a pair of the most heart-breaking sapphire blue eyes—eyes that could gleam like a summer sea, soften like a summer night sky, smile or blaze as the mood took her; eyes that were set under fine supercilious black eyebrows in an exquisitely shaped face. Nor was she to blame in that the cool indifference expressed in her haughty little nose and scornfully short upper lip was a challenge in itself to any self-respecting male.

She had been spoilt all her life. First by her parents, who had died when she was a small child, later by her guardians, of whom Captain Lindham—an old messmate of her father's—had been one; and her mother's sister, Letitia Cunliffe, the other.

Miss Cunliffe lived with her charge at the Firs, a little rambling white house, three miles from the Manor; and she and her co-guardian, who had his own bachelor establishment in the village beyond Danesthorpe Hall, had bickered incessantly over their ward.

Clover's coming of age and into complete control of her comfortable little income three years ago showed the curious results of the upbringing of a confirmed old bachelor and an elderly spinster. Ultra-feminine in some ways, yet having an outlook on many things that was more like a boy's than a girl's, and altogether fresh and wholesome and sweet and English as the flower she was named after. Imperious, independent, very scornful of sentimentality in man (since "Uncle" Bill breezily condemned it), kindly tolerant of the same failing in woman (seeing that Aunt Letty, whom she loved, was sentimentality itself), and withal rather charmingly oblivious of the fact that she had only to smile at the average man out of those blue eyes of hers and he straightway forgot the warning of arrogant nostril and scornful rose-coloured lip.

The latter was curved mutinously now, as she listened to Storrington's protests against the way she was scamping her work.

"Where are your bits of green moss?" he demanded dictatorially, standing over her. "Don't you know that no respectable stone wall is complete without moss? Where's your shadow—here, under this bit of moulding? Where——"

"Oh, don't be so pernickety!" she interrupted. "How close do you think all this is going to be looked at? Put the size a bit nearer to me, and don't talk so much!"

"I believe in being thorough," said Mr. Storrington in a smug tone, as he gingerly moved the aged iron pot that smoked and smelt to heaven. "And I'd also like to ask you *who's* going to look at this work of art—you or I, madam? *I* shall be in the front row of the stalls; *you* won't be able to see a blinkin' thing for trying to face the footlights and remember your cues."

"I've never had stage fright in my life!" scoffed Clover. "There's not an ounce of nervousness in my composition."

"Then there ought to be," was his undefeated retort. "As I've often had occasion to remark, you're a thoroughly brazen little image—"

—"Which my misguided guardians have set up." She flippantly distorted the rest of the quotation. "I know; I've heard it all before, Nickie dear. But I don't seem to have noticed you bowing down and worshipping."

"No room. Too many at the job already." He splashed on an ochre-coloured patch, then stepped back to look at it critically. "Even an outsize in prayer-mats wouldn't accommodate 'em all."

"Idiot." It was all the comment she vouchsafed to this last.

"Put it in the plural," he said with the tranquillity of privileged impertinence. "Not but what you're a per-

sonable wench, my dear," he added as he dodged a paint-stained rag which she rolled up and indignantly hurled at him. Then the door opened suddenly, letting in a blast of cold air, a sealyham puppy and two newcomers. One was Bevis Aylmer, the other Lady Angela Vyse, wrapped in a voluminous fur coat whose collar rose above her chin, almost meeting the brim of her scarlet suede hat, while its hem barely descended below her knees, revealing a pair of slim legs, clad in the thinnest of silk stockings. Lady Angela never considered suitability in her clothes, excepting when out hunting. They were always expensive, invariably arresting, and seldom appropriate to the occasion.

"Hullo—hullo, there!" Captain Lindham's bellow was genially reproachful. "Is this what you call putting in a morning's work?"

She waved a general greeting to everybody, exclaimed in drawling italics that she was *"terribly* sorry,—absolutely *abject!"* and throwing off her coat, stood revealed as a slip of a creature in the narrowest and briefest of tweed skirts, a scarlet silk jumper, and a plethora of jewelled bangles and chains wound about her slim wrists and bare throat.

About twenty-five, and intensely sophisticated, Angela Vyse had probably looked no younger at eighteen and would look no older ten years hence. She was frankly made up, but managed in some miraculous way to escape the suggestion of really bad form. Her brightly reddened mouth, with its full underlip, was like a scarlet wound against the artificial pallor of a face that had the roundness of a child's; the lashes of her long, greenish eyes were unnaturally black, and if the blonde hue of her shingled head owed nothing to art, few people believed it.

Two years ago she had come as a decidedly consolable widow to live in a luxurious modernized cottage on the

road between the old Manor and the Danesthorpe Hall gates; and soon after her arrival she had elected to fall head over ears in love with Bevis Aylmer. It was the attraction of contrasting types. She was quickbrained, small and ultra modern; he big, not startlingly intelligent, and in many ways a survival of the primitive. But for Clover Willoughby she would probably have had him at her feet before now; but her allurements hadn't been strong enough to detach him from his allegiance to that most unresponsive of divinities. From Clover's point of view, Bevis was just Ruth's brother; she regarded him, in fact, much in the light of a detached brother of her own, and looked on his bursts of sentimentalism merely as tiresome incidents which jarred the harmony of their comradeship.

She looked round now with a friendly, indiscriminating nod. Nothing could have been more casual; yet the smile left Angela Vyse's lips and the sparkle died out of her eyes. She had met Bevis outside his own gates as he was returning from a visit of inspection to some very early lambs who represented a new experiment in sheep-rearing. He had walked with her to the barn, and she had been trying to persuade herself that Clover Willoughby's presence there had nothing to do with his alacrity to accompany her. At Clover's nod, however, he promptly deserted his companion, drawn across the floor as a needle by a magnet to the corner where Clover and Storrington were working. Lady Angela turned her shoulder on the trio with a scarcely restrained jerk of irritation and walked over to the other group.

"You people seem to be getting on *amazingly* quickly," she drawled. "I really can't believe I'm wanted at all."

But Lindham had already put down his own palette to set another for her, and Ruth promptly inducted her into an overall.

"There's the back cloth to be done yet," Lindham told her. "That will take me all my time when I've got the rest of you properly started. I daren't trust it to anyone else."

At which she laughed, on a queer little high-pitched note that was rather taking, in spite of its affectation.

"You're complimentary, aren't you?" she said. "I suppose you think we can't very well come to grief *painting* stone walls, even if some of us *do* come unstuck over 'em out hunting. But anything the *least* little bit more ambitious . . ."

"A background for you, dear lady," he corrected her blandly, "is infinitely more ambitious—*and* important."

She laughed again, and wrinkled up her nose disapprovingly over the neutral-tinted shades he was mixing for her.

"Mud-pies!" she said. "And anyhow I shan't *need* a background in this scene; I shall be part of it." She shrugged her shoulders. "All the limelight's on Juan Karslake from the moment he comes in under that archway. *Juan*" . . . her drawl lingered over the name. "Doesn't it *suit* him? He simply *couldn't* be plain 'John,' —not for a moment. I say, Ruth," she swung round on her hostess,—"does he frighten you in that tower scene? Because he simply terrifies *me*."

"No, you absurd person." Ruth was emphatically not blessed with an imaginative temperament, and her own small part—that of a maid—required very little histrionic talent. "He's quite the most forbearing stage manager I've ever met; restraint itself. I'm sure if he really said what he thought about my persistent exits into the wrong wings, it would be lurid."

"Oh, I don't mean *that!*" Lady Angela applied a tentative patch of paint to her canvas and screwed up her eyes dubiously over the result. "It's his acting I'm think-

ing of. He looks so . . . so infernally *evil,* even without make-up. The man's whole personality seems to change."

"Or emerge," suggested Nick Storrington mildly. He had strolled over to inspect progress, carrying Lady Angela's puppy, which he had rescued from making painful discoveries with regard to boiling size. "Hold hard, lady!" he grinned at her. "I should hate to have to sue you for libelling the head of my family."

"But I should *love* you to do it," she returned with fervour. "Such a lot of *thrilling* things always come out in libel cases that the libellers themselves hadn't any idea of to begin with. I know so *little* about your cousin and I'm simply *longing* to know quite a lot."

"If there was anything thrilling to know about him," Storrington said, "trust the local inquisitors to have nosed it out before now. What about Doctor Richards? and the Vicaress, and Fairlie? I'll bet you there are precious few skeletons in Mershire cupboards that Fairlie hasn't heard charlestoning."

"But he wouldn't tell you if he had," Lady Angela complained. "Major Fairlie's the *most,* the *only* silent man I know. He may be very chatty to the wild beasts he shoots in Africa, but he doesn't waste soft nothings on human beings."

Storrington laughed.

"That suggests a priceless item for a wireless programme," he said. "Relayed from Central Africa:—Fairlie cooing lullabies to a charging rhinoceros. *Good*-night, everybody!"

Captain Lindham interrupted the laughter which greeted this hypothetical picture. It was, he thought with some impatience, extraordinary how conversation between any group of people in this neighbourhood invariably drifted to the subject of Juan Karslake.

"What's this I hear, Nick," he asked, "about your

playing the Good Samaritan to a tramp who was knocked down by old Tomlinson's motor-van?"

Storrington's quizzical eyebrows rose half an inch higher, as he gently pulled the puppy's ears and restrained its frantic efforts to lick his face.

"Well, I couldn't exactly leave the poor beggar lying in the road for someone else to flatten out, could I?" he said. "Put it down to my account, Skipper, the next time that the sight of one of our hares crossing the road when you're motoring home at twelve p.m., leads you to mistake the accelerator for the brake. Remember that whatever your forbearing neighbours may do about their game, the law wouldn't approve of your robbing the casual ward to provide yourself with jugged tramp."

"Did the Skipper really do that?" Ruth turned on him incredulously.

"Fool animal ran right into my head-lights." Lindham was quite unabashed. "He was damn tough, too."

"Anyway, who told you about my tramp?" Storrington went on serenely. "Oh, Richards, *of* course."

"And that you were taking him on as a stable-helper in place of young Greening," the other added.

"I may do," Storrington said thoughtfully. "The work's too much for Martin alone, when the hunting's on; and this fellow's apparently had experience as a groom-chauffeur. I should say he's a glutton for work too. He's only been out of bed a couple of days, and he's already finding odd jobs for himself about the place."

Lindham looked dubious.

"Rather a haphazard way of doing things, isn't it?" he commented. "I suppose you'll take up his references, though?"

"O Lord, yes! But if I decide to take him on I shan't wait for 'em. His late employer's abroad at present, and letters may follow him round and get delayed."

"Nickie!" Lady Angela stared at him with mingled amusement and horror. "You really *deserve* to be murdered in your bed when you engage your servants like that these *criminal* days! If your cousin's old housekeeper up at the Hall knew of it, she certainly wouldn't wail any more over *his* methods!"

"Does she wail? I understood she was thundering glad to stay on in a very cushy place. A lot of 'em had to be sacked, you know, when the old man died. Got too big for their boots with nothing to do during the last years of the old régime. What's Mrs. Henslow got to complain about?"

Lady Angela grew faintly pink through the coating of powder.

"Oh, it's just servants' gossip," she said. "I oughtn't to have repeated it. But she told my maid—who's rather a crony of hers, that she'd *never* had an employer 'in all her born days' like Mr. Karslake, who *insisted* on seeing all the men-servants' references himself, and in some cases *actually* interviewed them personally. She said that the business of engaging the domestic staff was always left *entirely* to the housekeeper in *all* the best houses." Lady Angela drew herself up with perfect mimicry of the manner and tone of the old-fashioned upper servant. One could almost hear the jingle of keys, the rustle of satin; one visualized the portly, scandalized figure, outraged, protesting, but—in view of that "very cushy place"—inevitably resigned.

"Good Lord!" Storrington whistled softly. "What an odd thing for him to do! How on earth can he know anything about what's required in English servants?"

"He seems to think he knows what *isn't*," Lady Angela said. "According to Mrs. Henslow, he wouldn't hear of her engaging a 'perfect treasure' of a second footman

simply because the 'treasure's' last place had been abroad with a foreign family—'very high class.' I *think* it was in Seville. Perhaps he thinks travel's unsettling for the lower classes? Do you think that was his idea?"

"Heaven knows! *I* don't." Nick shrugged his shoulders, disclaiming all responsibility for his cousin's vagaries.

But this curious idiosyncrasy on Karslake's part intrigued him not a little.

After all, who was to say what secrets lay behind the curtains which old Robert Karslake's death had parted briefly to let his unknown heir pass through them into the inner circle of a conventional English neighbourhood?

He would have given a good deal to know more about Karslake's antecedents generally. The subject returned to his mind as he walked home to lunch. It was astonishing, take it all in all, how little anyone knew about the man.

He was what he claimed to be, right enough; the lawyers had verified all that. But from the days of his early manhood until now, when he was thirty-two years old, even those who had known his parents seemed to have completely lost sight of him. And he was consistently uncommunicative. There didn't seem to be a part of the world which he didn't know, yet he never mentioned any definite date when he had visited it. And he seemed to have made no friends; or if he had, he never spoke of them. Names, dates and places were conspicuous by their absence in any mention he might make of countries in which he had sojourned.

Also, he was emphatically not a man of whom one asked questions. He had a way of ignoring them with a blank simplicity that was royally conclusive.

Storrington's thoughts were interrupted here by a hail

from the road. A car had overtaken him, slowed past him and stopped—a big green touring car, the latest word in luxury and comfort combined with speed. The man who drove it leant out and hailed him.

It was Juan Karslake.

CHAPTER III

"LIKE a lift, Storrington?"

Although seven months had elapsed since Karslake's arrival, it was noticeable that these two kinsmen had not yet reached the stage of Christian names. They were still "Karslake" and "Storrington" to each other; and with Nick at least, who met most people on cheerfully informal grounds at the shortest notice, this was very significant.

"Come on up to lunch," Karslake said as the other climbed in. "I've got Fairlie lunching with me."

"No, thanks, really." Storrington shook his head. "There's the devil of a lot of work waiting for me this afternoon."

"Hang the work! Give it a miss to-day. You're the most unsociable beggar; I believe you invent work to hide behind when I want someone to idle with."

A shadow crossed the dark good-looking face and there was a touch of impatience in Karslake's voice—a peculiarly delightful voice, clear and almost caressingly soft. Nick glanced at him quickly and away again.

"You've plenty of other people to idle with," he said easily. "Don't tempt me to forget that I've got my living to earn. Between relations, of all people, business should be strictly business. I've spent an unprofitable morning as it is, painting your scenery up at the Manor. Why weren't you there?"

"Miss Aylmer never asked me," Karslake said briefly. His companion had been perfectly aware of that fact, but he raised his eyebrows in polite surprise.

"Didn't she? Well, there are enough of 'em at it, in all conscience: Lindham and Lady Angela and Clover Willoughby."

"More than enough, I should say," Karslake commented. "My assistance certainly wasn't needed."

His tone was as serene as though the fact of Clover Willoughby's having been there didn't affect either his regret or his indifference at not having been invited.

Perhaps, after all, it didn't affect it. Nick wasn't sure. Karslake's attitude to anyone was difficult to gauge. That personal reserve which he maintained so unswervingly, seemed to hedge him round and to ward off any degree of intimacy with him. He was looked on by most men as a good sportsman and a pleasant fellow and by their womenfolk as attractive and decidedly "intriguing"; yet he fell undoubtedly short of being the acquisition to the neighbourhood which he might have been expected to prove; and it would have been impossible to say whether that curious atmosphere of isolation which made itself felt about him existed by his own wish or not.

He was in many ways a man of mystery, a stranger within the gates behind which he had lived now for seven months. Even his easy, graceful manners, a trifle more meticulously perfect than the average Englishman's only emphasized this fact. Like his appearance, they held just that suggestion of a foreign strain which marked him out as differing from his neighbours.

Two kinsmen more utterly unlike than he and Nicholas Storrington would have been difficult to find. In appearance alone they were almost opposites. Storrington was exceptionally fair under the ordinary tan of English outdoor life, while Karslake was exceptionally dark—for an Englishman. His features were very finely cut; they might almost have been considered effeminate if the strong

lines of chin and jaw hadn't redeemed them from that charge.

The mouth, in particular, barely shaded by a close-clipped moustache, would, in a woman, have been called beautiful.

"The mouth of an angel and the eyes of a devil—a haunted devil," so Angela Vyse had once described him.

It was an apt description. His light hazel eyes, set with thick jet lashes, were almost startling in their contrast to his dark face; but had they been black as night, they could not have been more sombre than they were at most times. At others they conveyed the rather uncomfortable effect of a watchful animal—an animal whose thoughts one could not read, against whose possible actions one could not guard oneself. Behind that steady amber glow there might lie an utter indifference to the world at large, or some more sinister element—a pitiless intent—even unreasoning, deliberate cruelty such as lies dormant in a drowsing tiger. Juan Karslake's eyes might, in fact, belong to a man who had been through hell himself, or who had made and might still make a hell for others.

As the roof of the Dower House came in sight over the park wall, Storrington laid his hand on the other man's arm.

"Drop me here, will you?" he said, "and many thanks for the lift."

"Oh, damn it all!" Karslake protested impatiently. "What do you want to be so punctilious for? And look here! why *won't* you come up to the Hall to lunch? Fairlie tells me that in the old man's time you lunched there almost daily, as a matter of course; so why the dickens shouldn't you do the same now?"

The suddenness of the challenge surprised a blunt answer out of Storrington.

"Because the position isn't quite the same," he said.

Karslake frowned.

"You mean"—he spoke very quietly and deliberately—"that at that time you had every reason to suppose that the place would eventually be your own? Oh, I know!" He made a swift, expressive gesture with one long, beautifully-shaped brown hand. Oddly enough it was the first time this aspect of affairs had been broached between these two. "The whole thing was damned hard lines on you, and an almost unparalleled piece of good fortune for me. But if I were to die . . . you and I are both singularly devoid of relations, you know. You are my next of kin."

The other nodded. "Add to which," he remarked ironically, "that you are several years younger than I, and that, humanly speaking, you're bound to marry sooner or later."

"I shall *not* marry." The delicately cut lips hardened; the sombre gleam in the tawny eyes was shrouded by lashes that almost met, as Karslake stared along the road before him with a steady, concentrated gaze. "Unless several things absolutely unforeseen happen. I have no intention of ever marrying; and—your life is as good as mine. I should say" (he laughed; but there was a curiously grim note in the soft sound) "that it's a long sight *better* than mine."

His companion stared questioningly at him, genuinely startled. Again Karslake laughed and shook his head.

"No, I'm not threatened with any fatal disease," he said. "Perfectly sound and fit, as far as I know. Still, I don't fancy any insurance company would be justified in giving me as good terms as they would give you."

Storrington shrugged his shoulders.

"Not perhaps while you were knocking about in uncivilized parts of the world where fatal accidents and

tropical fevers remove perfectly strong men daily," he retorted. "But, my dear chap," his tone was, perforce, rather warmer than it had ever been yet towards his companion, "why dwell on unpleasant possibilities? As things stand at present, that's certainly all they are. Barely possible and rankly improbable."

"Think so?" the other asked briefly. "Ah well, it's true that you may have lived a few years longer than I, but if you'd spent those years as I've spent mine, you'd never talk of improbabilities. You'd just—" his smile was whimsical and distinctly charming, "come to lunch and sink the conscientious agent in the cousin, for once."

"Put like that, I can't very well say no," Nick conceded amiably. "Let me get out here, though, and I'll run in and let Mrs. Martin know."

Karslake stopped the car.

"I'll drive through this way," he said. "It will save time, and I'm a bit late, as it is."

"Right."

Storrington got out and opened the double doors in the park wall. The other drove through and on to the Dower House. When Storrington overtook the stationary car outside the little white gate, its owner was lying back in his seat, intent on the cigarette he was lighting. His thick tweed overcoat, of a particularly vivid shade of red-brown, struck a note of warmth and opulence against the wintry sky and naked trees behind him. There was always a tendency in him to choose rather vivid colouring in his clothes, whenever it was possible. Absolutely orthodox in cut and material as far as his London or evening clothes were concerned, in the country they were sometimes inclined a little to the bizarre. The brim of his soft hat was perhaps a little wider than most men wore theirs and lost nothing from the rakish angle at which it was worn; and the vari-coloured silk handkerchief which he

had been known to adopt as neckwear, tying it in a picturesque bow, carried a buccaneering suggestion about it that was arrestingly unconventional.

But his clothes suited the man; he seemed able to carry them off, though both Dawes and the Skipper had been right about his height. Juan Karslake was only five foot nine; but his easy grace gave an impression of reserved sinewy strength.

Storrington went up the garden path to the house. A trowel and basket lay on the grass beside one of the borders, but there was no one about. As he reached the door, however, Martin suddenly appeared from the stable-yard.

"Ah, Mr. Nicholas, I thought mebbe as it'd be you! Albert's been a-plantin' out them there lilies in the border, and 'e said as 'ow there was a car outside the gate. So I come out. I clean forgot to ask you, should I try Sparrowhawk in a double-bridle this afternoon, if so be as you're meaning to hunt him on Saturday? Though it's my belief you'll never 'old 'im in it, not when 'ounds are running."

"I've a damn good mind to sell him," Storrington said. "He was a bad buy, Martin. I've only had two satisfactory days hunting out of him yet, as far as the season's gone. Always something wrong."

Martin looked grim.

"And I dunno as it ain't just as well, Mr. Nick," he said. "If there 'adn't been something wrong with 'im, more often than not it'd never have surprised me if there 'adn't been somethin' a sight more wrong with *you* before the day was over. For all the trouble that 'orse 'as give me, I don't say as there's not been times when I've been downright glad to 'ave him safe in the stable, with a sore back, or corfin' 'is 'ead off. 'E's a born rogue, that 'orse;

and give 'im 'alf a chance I reckon 'e'll show you what 'e is."

Storrington laughed.

"He's never bolted with me, nor got rid of me yet, Martin," he said.

Martin shook his head.

"Not in that gag bridle," he conceded darkly. "And what I sez is: Better 'is mouth cut about a bit than *your* 'ead cut open. But you will 'ave it your own way."

To which regretful criticism his master vouchsafed no comment. It was true enough that for all his genial sweetness and seeming adaptability he had always gone his own way. Generous with advice and sympathy to other people, he neither sought nor welcomed it for himself.

"Where's Albert?" he asked now.

"Albert? Do you want him, sir?"

"No, not particularly. But what's he doing at the present moment?"

"Couldn't say, sir. 'E's a queer shy sort of bloke in some ways. Always clears out o' sight when anybody comes up to the 'ouse, even if it's only one of the tradesmen. Takes it 'ard, I reckon, that 'e should have come down to tramping the roads, an 'e being a furriner an' all. Sensitive—like."

Storrington nodded. He was silent a moment.

"Well, he speaks quite decent English," he said. "No one would know that he's a foreigner unless he chose to tell them so. However, I suppose it's got about in the village?"

"Not that I know of, sir," Martin said. "You see, it's like this. Mrs. Owen, at the lodge, she says to my missus, 'I calls it fair tempting providence,' she says, 'to take a tramping feller off the roads into a body's home; and some fine morning,' she says, 'you'll all wake up and find

the place 'as been burgled from garret to cellar.' And that put the Missus' back up; so she shut up like a knife, with never a word about the poor chap being a furriner. If Mrs. Owen 'ad got 'old of that, she'd 'a' made a terrible tale of it."

"But I suppose Belinda knows," Storrington said.

"Not she, sir. Mrs. Martin, she don't believe in chattering to the girls; takes their minds off their work." Storrington nodded.

"Finding the fellow really useful?" he asked.

"Werry 'andy, sir, 'andy and willin'."

"That's good. Well, tell Mrs. Martin I shan't be in to lunch, will you?" He turned and went back to rejoin Karslake.

Martin looked after him with genuine affection in his little hard grey eyes. It was just like Master Nick, all in a brief five minutes to spare thought for the convenience and comfort of three separate beings—Mrs. Martin, Albert, and the chestnut horse.

"Sorry to have been so long," Storrington said. "Martin kept me talking about the horses."

"Are you hunting on Saturday?" Karslake asked as they drove on.

The other answered that he was, but that it wouldn't be much of a day. When they met at Barkstone they generally drew the Abbey woods, "and it's odds on," he added, "that we never get away. Hung about between there and Three Wells Spinney. I shall take that chestnut of mine out and see how he goes in a different bit."

"Is that the horse you bought from Shepherd?" Karslake asked as he swung the car out of the side drive into the main approach to the house. "Good-looking beast, but wants some riding, doesn't he?"

Nick gave a short laugh. He was a first-class horse-

man, and his mounts wouldn't have been everybody's choice.

"In other words, he's not exactly one of your four hundred-guinea confidential hunters that can't make a mistake," he agreed. "I can't afford to buy that kind."

"And I wouldn't care to," Karslake said carelessly. "If one wants to sleep, one might as well sleep in an armchair as on a horse's back. I liked the look of that chestnut of yours."

"Care to buy him?" Nick grinned. "He'll give you no armchair ride, if that's what you're after."

"Why? Are you thinking of selling him?"

"I may do. It's quite true that he's a showy beast and a good performer. But he's got a bad mouth and not much stamina. He's been eating his head off in the stable for the last fortnight with a cough; and before that it was a sore back. He's not the hunter for anyone who hasn't got a string of 'em, and that's the long and the short of it. But he's fast and he can jump."

Karslake nodded.

"If you decide on selling him, I'd like to try him," he said. "I've got room for him."

That was true enough.

To the left of the big house as they drove up to it, an archway led through into a spacious courtyard, round three sides of which ran the stalls, looseboxes, harness-rooms and coachhouse. For the last ten years they had been nearly empty; but now they were brisk with the bustle of never-ending work connected with half a dozen hunters and hacks and several cars.

The old eighteenth-century profiteer who founded the house of Karslake had been no sportsman; but he had employed an architect who knew his business, and the solid roomy buildings had been very good specimens of the stable architecture of the period. This year their new

owner had spent money lavishly in bringing them up to date in readiness for the hunting season. Acting on Storrington's advice, he had made all the improvements which Nick himself had once looked forward to making.

The car swept round the long oval of smooth turf that stretched in front of the house. A glance in through the stable archway as they passed revealed a little blue two-seater stranded in the middle of the courtyard.

"That's Fairlie's Austin Seven," Karslake said, and flashing on, drew up before the hall-door at the bottom of the wide flight of steps which a man was mounting. He turned and barked a jerky greeting at them—a tall, spare man in the late fifties, whose long gaitered legs showed almost incredibly thin under the loose overcoat that hung in folds from his shoulders. A man with a bony face over which the skin was carved in lines, tightly stretched and weather-beaten to match the consistency of leather. A short, grizzled moustache emphasized the uncompromising decision of a mouth like a rat-trap, and a pair of bristling eyebrows shaded his keen, light-grey eyes like thatch over twin windows. It was said by his friends that nothing escaped Duncan Fairlie's eyes; but they told no more than his tongue. As windows to a storehouse of secrets they might have been shuttered as well as overhung for all that anyone had ever learnt from them. In any case he was, as Lady Angela had remarked, a very silent man, save with his intimate friends, or on subjects which constituted his hobbies.

"Blame this fellow and not me, Major," his host said as they shook hands. "He's responsible for my being late."

"I'm late myself," Fairlie said briefly. "Only beaten you by a short head."

The three men walked up the steps together and into the big stone-floored hall. Under the old régime it had

been a truly vault-like apartment, and the chill breath with which it met you had been the most inhospitable of greetings. Old Robert had only lived in one wing of the great house; and with the exception of the servants' quarters, the rest of the building had been practically shut up. Things were very different now. Juan Karslake might lock the doors in his park against intruders, but the moment you crossed his threshold the house glowed a welcome to you in cheery wood fires that roared up the wide chimneys, and banks of hothouse flowers massed everywhere about the big, stately rooms. That queer nameless scent which belongs to houses of any respectable age and is born of ancient furniture and hangings, the ghosts of many smoked pipes, the faint fragrance of old pot-pourri, was almost lost in the scent of living blooms. It wasn't only in his personal adornment that Karslake showed his semi-foreign origin. The warmth and colour and hospitality of Southern Europe—his two guests felt their undoubted charm. Major Fairlie forgot his irritation at having been kept waiting at the lodge gates for at least ten minutes while old Owen hunted for the key to the padlock that fastened them.

In the big dining room, where deft men-servants moved noiselessly on the thick carpet and the wines and food were alike beyond criticism, Nick, towards the end of lunch, fell thoughtfully silent, leaving the other two to a discussion of native African customs.

The thing which Karslake had said to him only this morning came back and hammered in his brain.

"No insurance company would give me as good terms as they would give you."

It was an extraordinary thing for him to have said. Nick's eyes slowly wandered over the vast room, up to the heavily ornamented ceiling, down again to the table with its massing of beautiful old silver and flowers. He

was intrigued by a good many other things besides Karslake's enigmatical utterance.

His great-uncle, although he had practically shut up most of the house and had spent his declining years in seclusion, had to the last kept up all the state of a large establishment, and his successor, while opening up once more the long suites of unused rooms, had accepted the régime he found, and had made no alterations in a way of living that was certainly more elaborate and ceremonious than the average rich sporting bachelor cares to be bothered with. Yet he was a man who, according to his own account, had "roughed it" with entire content in most uncivilized quarters of the globe. The foreign strain in him might demand warmth and colour when he could get it, but he didn't strike one as the kind of person who would have any sybaritish tendencies. Could it be that he was passively accepting the *rôle* which had been thrust upon him, because, for some mysterious reason, he really believed that he wasn't likely to fill it for very long?

He certainly *looked* healthy and virile enough; was it possible that he considered himself to be under some curse—some prophesied vengeance for a crime he had committed against someone? There was always that strain of alien blood in him to account for superstitions which an undiluted English ancestry would scoff at. But then, again, one does not lock gates against such intangible things as curses or prophecies.

When lunch was over the three men repaired to the library for their coffee. It was a very long room, unusually long in relation to its width, and running the whole depth of the house from back to front, its big bay windows opening on to a terrace.

It had two doors; one, leading in from the hall, was in the middle of the long wall facing the windows; the other was at the far end of the room and gave access to a long

conservatory, which ran along the back of the house and led into various other rooms opening off the hall. The big fireplace was also at that end of the room—dominating it with its towering overmantel, carved and emblazoned with shields and coats of arms.

Nick had always thought the library to be the most attractive room in the house, with its rich, subdued scheme of colouring and its massive comfortable furniture; while the collection of books which lined every available space was a valuable one, and included a large assortment of travels and histories that were almost unique.

Fairlie, who was editing and re-writing a collection of his own sporting and historical articles which had been published at various times in the serious magazines, had always had free access to it, and had found it very useful for reference. Now old Robert Karslake's successor had extended the invitation to drop in and use it whenever he pleased.

This afternoon, with armchairs drawn up to the big open fire, and coffee and liqueurs laid out on a small table, the library looked a tempting place in which to spend an idle hour or so, smoking or gossiping.

Nick resisted the invitation of one of those deep armchairs and, coffee cup in hand, strolled over to a window and stood looking out over the terrace to the far-stretching slopes of the park, with its clumps of thorn trees, its giant beeches and oaks, leafless now, each branch and twig delicately clear against the sky, while their trunks arose from seas of brown bracken.

Behind him his host was searching in a remote bookcase for the authority which would prove his point in an argument with Fairlie; before him, just beyond the terrace, a grassy avenue stretched straight and far into the misty blue of the woods that bordered the park. A cock-pheasant flew across it, catching the pale winter sunlight

in a flash of gleaming bronze and gold. One of Nick's earliest memories as a very small boy had been of riding up that grass avenue on a shaggy pony, his mother leading it as she walked beside him. Danesthorpe Hall had been her home as a child; he couldn't remember exactly when it was that something said by his elders had first implanted in his mind the idea that it would eventually also be his own.

He had originally been meant for the army, but he had strained his heart, mountain climbing, on a holiday in Switzerland just before he was to have gone up for Sandhurst. It was very long now since any but the most occasional sensation of breathlessness and discomfort even reminded him of it; and he knew that at the time his mother hadn't been altogether sorry for the weakness which had kept him at home, instead of breaking up the little family circle of three. So the idea of soldiering had been given up, and he had been trained in land agency with a view to stepping into his father's shoes; and his parents had undoubtedly believed that his specialized knowledge would some day be useful to him on his own account.

His great-uncle had never mentioned to anyone his intentions as regarded the disposal of the place at his death; but in the claims which he always made upon Nick's personal interest in it, it was almost as though he had said in so many words, "After all, who should be eager to improve the property if not you, to whom it will some day belong?"

Oh, certainly old Robert had given him every excuse to consider himself the heir, and all the while there had been nothing behind it but the self-centred egotism of a rich old man, ready to believe that what lay nearest his own heart must needs arouse altruistic enthusiasm in others.

Fairlie's voice at his elbow brought him back from his unprofitable dreams.

"I always think that avenue's one of the prettiest bits of the park—what?"

Nick sipped his coffee slowly.

"I never think about it," he said. "It's been part of my life ever since I can remember. To me it's always been just an avenue of trees, with the old house at the far end, solid, dependable . . . waiting for you."

His voice was quite expressionless; *too* expressionless. He had relaxed his guard a little; people were apt to relax their guard with Fairlie.

"The old house . . . waiting . . ."

Aye; and *he* had waited for the house, waited through all the years of his young manhood . . . poor devil!

The older man cursed himself silently for a tactless fool.

Perhaps Nick Storrington noticed his discomfort.

He pulled himself together and switched the conversation, with seeming irrelevance, into another channel.

"Talking about avenues," he began; and went on to refer to a certain African sacrificial grove which the other two had been discussing at lunch. "It sounds to have been a pretty ghastly bit of scenery," he said. "D'you really mean to say that you actually saw it?"

"Skulls and crucifixions and vultures, all complete—yes, I saw it," Fairlie assured him grimly.

"It's the skulls that would have got *me*," Nick remarked with a grimace of repugnance. "Skulls are always such particularly beastly things, somehow. Those eyeless sockets and the way they grin at you . . . And then they've collected such a lot of gruesome associations. There was the 'skull and cross-bones,' for instance, the pirates' emblem. *That* stood for a good deal of beastliness, I imagine."

"So did the skull which the Decisi took for their badge," Fairlie said. "Neither Africa nor the West Indies have a monopoly of that kind of macabre fancy."

"The Decisi? Who were they?" Nick asked.

"One of the Neapolitan secret societies; an early nineteenth century affair," the other said. "Fellow known as Don Ciro—a priest, I'll thank you—was the big noise in that particular movement, and you had to commit two cold-blooded murders to become a *fratello* of the Order. Friend Ciro was shot with his back to the wall after General Church caught him in 1818. He confessed to thirty or forty murders, but hadn't kept accurate account."

"A pleasant little feller," Nick remarked with mild irony.

"Oh, the Decisi could have given some West African tribes points in the way of sheer, callous devilry," Fairlie said. "The Carbonari and the Calderari were Quakers' meetings in comparison."

"I suppose there were a lot of those secret societies about in Southern Europe at one time?" Nick said.

A curious train of thought was running in his head. Locked gates to an English park . . . and a man with a dark un-English face, saying grimly, "If you'd spent your years as I've spent mine you'd never talk of improbabilities . . ."

"There are some still," Fairlie said. He happened to be embarked now on one of his pet subjects. "But the Italian ones were fairly well cleaned up in Church's day. The Mafia—murder and blackmail was their line—emigrated to New Orleans and got a nasty knock somewhere in the nineties, as far as I recollect. They 'did in' the Chief of Police there, and the townsfolk stormed the gaol and took justice into their own hands . . ."

The historian in him was well away. From medieval orders of assassins to modern murder gangs, political

groups, social crusades, the Black Hand, the Ku Klux Klan, he ranged swiftly and jerkily, flinging illuminating lights on things the average man knows nothing of. He was a bit of a criminologist in his way; and the police of most countries, with whom his explorations had brought him in contact, had contributed their quota to his storehouse of knowledge.

Nick, flinging in a judicious question here and there, had learnt some curious things by the time that Karslake had found the reference he wanted and joined them again.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Aylmer put down the piece of fine canvas which she was patiently covering with *petit point,* and busied herself with the tea-things.

"It's really about time those poor dears had an interval of rest," she remarked, smiling, to the only other occupant of the Manor drawing-room. "Ruth thought that they might as well have tea separately in the smoking-room; but I know what that means at rehearsals. Just a snatched cup and a bolted sandwich . . . most uncomfortable. So I put my foot down."

Mrs. Aylmer liked occasionally to fancy that she *did* issue ultimatums and was firmly mistress of her own house. Nobody was ever taken in by the little by-play, though most people who knew her pretended to be. She was a graceful, faded woman with plaintive grey eyes, much sweetness of disposition and very little force of character.

Letitia Cunliffe agreed briskly that stage rehearsals were sufficiently trying to the nerves and the temper to make an interval absolutely necessary.

"They've been hard at it for over two hours," she said. "But certainly they needed it as far as I can make out. Clover tells me that nobody is anywhere near word perfect yet except Mr. Karslake and Captain Lindham."

Miss Cunliffe never adopted the general nickname for Lindham. The armed neutrality which had always existed between her and the Skipper forbade it.

Both perforce respected the other's good qualities and

each was secretly a little jealous of the other's influence over Clover.

Letitia Cunliffe was a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman, whose unmistakable air of breeding almost redeemed her plainness. She made no pretensions to being up-to-date. Her long, narrow feet had never worn the modern, open-worked shoe, her mouse-grey hair was coiled neatly at the back of her small head, and her skirts were neither so brief nor so scanty as modern fashions decreed. She looked what she was—the typical English country gentlewoman who still flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century. She retained strong prejudices, but was too well-mannered to obtrude them. Good manners were still, to Letitia Cunliffe, the fetish they had been in her extreme youth. In her secret soul she agreed with the old lady immortalised by Punch, that some things were "*worse* than wicked—they were vulgar."

For that reason, the young man of the present day didn't meet with her approval at all. She was extremely fond of Mrs. Aylmer and Ruth, but Bevis she regarded, not unjustly, as spoilt, off-hand, and taking the devotion of his womenfolk far too much for granted. Even his undoubted good qualities were obliterated in Miss Cunliffe's mind by her secret terror lest Clover should elect to throw herself away on him.

One was never, she told herself, quite able to gauge the effects of propinquity and persistence. And there was that little fool Angela Vyse, throwing herself blatantly at the young man's head, and providing at once the mischievous element of rivalry.

Bevis, who had been out shooting all the afternoon, came in now, looking, she was bound to admit, a remarkably fine specimen of humanity, his six feet two inches set off to the best possible advantage by his rough light tweeds. He brought with him into the warm, flower-

scented atmosphere a rush of cold air, with the aroma of damp Harris tweeds and tobacco. It was raining heavily outside. His mother shivered.

"Oh, my dear, you've left the hall door open!" she protested.

"Loftus is just shutting it," he said. "Is tea ready? Good. It's turned out a perfectly foul afternoon, Mum, but we've got you a brace of partridges and a hare."

"I didn't know Mr. Loftus had gone out with you," Mrs. Aylmer said. "Weren't they expecting him for the rehearsal?"

"Oh, he'll get all the rehearsal he can do with after tea," Bevis said easily. "They were taking the first act and he doesn't come on in that at all."

Miss Cunliffe smiled, as one who knew.

Loftus, a cheery young soldier, was up on leave for the hunting and staying at a hotel in Gatesby, the neighbouring country town. He had only been roped in for the theatricals because Clover was acting in them; and the first act, which saw her entirely absorbed by her own scenes with Lady Angela and the two other men, left him quite cold. Pottering round the place with Bevis and a couple of dogs and guns was far more to his taste. He was a healthy, light-hearted young man, susceptible to the attractions of every pretty face, but ranking sport of any kind easily first.

He joined Bevis now, and the two went off to clean up before tea. By the time they returned, the rehearsing party were established round the drawing-room fire, chattering and chaffing and munching muffins and savoury sandwiches. Clover Willoughby was wedged into a corner of the big ottoman by the stout form of the Skipper, who was engaged in a fiery argument with a guest of the Aylmers, a good-looking woman whose soldier husband

was at present stationed abroad, in a spot to which she couldn't accompany him.

Loftus cast a regretful glance at Clover, and then, *faute de mieux,* established himself on the hearthrug at Ruth Aylmer's feet.

He liked Ruth. Most young men liked her; they didn't fall in love with her, but they confided in her, took her lectures meekly, and she could have adopted cartloads of brothers had she felt so inclined. At present, however, the only brother she possessed was giving her quite enough to worry about.

Bevis, unlike Guy Loftus, wasn't prone to accept philosophically a situation that didn't please him; and the disposition of the group about the fire and the low tea-table didn't please him at all.

Karslake, having just returned the muffin dish to the stand in the fender, had come to anchor on the arm of the ottoman close to Clover, where he could look down on her dark brown head, showing copper glints in the soft lamplight. If Bevis had been entirely positive that the fellow was merely adopting a picturesque pose, as he sat there in an attitude of lazy grace, he wouldn't have objected so much; but Karslake was supporting himself with one long brown hand on the back of the ottoman, and Clover's short burnished waves brushed it whenever she threw back her head to laugh up at him in that challenging, tantalizing way of hers which meant so little and was so damned deceptive. The Skipper, in the heat of his argument with Mrs. Mordaunt, had turned a broad back upon them both and practically shut them off into a *solitude à deux.*

Bevis fidgetted, and remained resolutely blind to Angela Vyse's indication of a corner of the low padded fender beside her. Finally he took up his stand with grim determination just behind the two on the ottoman.

They were discussing cars; their conversation bristled with tires and brakes and "dipping lights." It seemed that Karslake was certainly making a very poor use of his opportunities. Bevis, standing rigidly upright, a towering sentinel, listened gloomily as he balanced his muffin on his saucer and mentally stigmatized the other man a fool as well as a nuisance. The idea didn't suggest itself to him that Karslake's impersonality was in itself an attraction to a girl who spent most of her time heading her male acquaintances off the sentimentally personal note.

Presently a pause in the general conversation made their own audible to everyone; and first Guy Loftus, then Ruth, and finally the Skipper, worsted in his argument with Mrs. Mordaunt, joined in. Lady Angela, who cheerfully drove her Morris Cowley without the ghost of an idea of its mechanism, put her fingers to her ears.

"Stop it," she shrieked. "Who wants to hear all about the 'innards' of your *wretched* cars? It's barely decent!"

"I'm rather with you," Letitia Cunliffe agreed. "I used to think," she added, "that the man who talked hunting all day long was bad enough, particularly when he insisted on telling you exactly where he was—and where *you* knew he wasn't!—in that forty minutes of the best from Something-or-other-Spinney to Any-old-name-Copse. And of course the golf-maniac who explains to you what mashie he used out of the rough at the fifteenth green wants a lot of beating. But the nuisance who figuratively strips his car of every nut and screw for your unwilling edification wants shooting, and that's all there is to it!"

Mrs. Mordaunt laughed.

"I would like my husband to hear that," she said. "But he's an incurable offender. And it's an odd thing, you know, that a motoring maniac's never *really* happy when his car is running smoothly. He thinks he is, but he isn't. A man's attitude towards cars is rather the same

as his attitude towards women . . . when they're good, they're dull!"

"In other words, what you can depend on never interests you very much," Clover suggested.

"Well, it doesn't *intrigue* you," Loftus said with a funny little air of authority. "Put it like that."

"And *that's* the curse of the modern age," Miss Cunliffe retorted. "We're not content to be amused or pleased; we must be intrigued . . . ridiculous word!"

"Because the sensation's so rare," the Skipper said. "You're lucky if you can find a genuine mystery or a puzzle to intrigue you now-a-days. There's precious little mystery about you women, for one thing; you've chucked your hand in completely. Talk about taking a car to bits and revealing its innards—why, good Lord! when you don't undress yourselves in public, you strip your souls in print. There isn't enough mystery about anybody these days to cover a pin's head."

"*Dear* Skipper!" cooed Lady Angela softly. She stretched out her long slim legs and surveyed them with a meditative approval as she nibbled her sandwich.

"I don't agree with you there, Skipper," Bevis interposed bluntly. "Seems to me, even in a place like this, where we've all lived cheek by jowl for years, we're still more or less bound to take each other at our face value."

"And as for strangers within the gates, like me," young Loftus grinned, "why, I may be a potential criminal for all you know. And there's Karslake, he isn't an old inhabitant either. How d'you know that Karslake didn't come here with half a dozen messy murders on his conscience?"

Juan Karslake smiled, in the swift, charming fashion that made one forget the curious impression which his eyes sometimes conveyed.

"To have got them over would be something," he said.

"The 'potential' element, on the other hand, sounds almost *too* intriguing to be really comfortable in a near neighbour."

"A much too near neighbour," Ruth added with emphasis, making a mock dramatic show of drawing her skirt aside from contact with the young man's feet. "Bevis, you've started a horrible train of thought. Will somebody kindly remove the cake-knife from the vicinity of Mr. Loftus, in case he should suddenly cease to be merely 'potential'?"

Mrs. Aylmer protested here, more than half in earnest. "Don't be so horribly gruesome, all of you," she exclaimed. "You're sending cold shivers down my back."

Bevis took his empty teacup over to the table to be replenished.

"Mum isn't really the least squeamish," he informed the company gravely, "but a feverish course of newspaper serials has taught her how terribly difficult it is to dispose of corpses."

At which Mrs. Aylmer, who was an exceedingly literal person, became quite pink and agitated in her protestations. Her big son patted her soothingly on the back and kissed the top of her head. Clover Willoughby found herself thinking, not for the first time, that he could be decidedly lovable in some capacities.

"Well, according to Mr. Loftus," Lady Angela drawled, "you can get expert advice on the subject from Danesthorpe Hall, any day you like."

"Which," Karslake remarked gravely, "is an optimistic statement. I make a point of never giving away trade secrets."

"Or pandering to morbid curiosity," Clover laughed. "Quite right. Don't let them persuade you into it. Though, for that matter," she added with a sudden flicker

of semi-seriousness, "I can't somehow imagine you ever doing anything you hadn't deliberately meant to."

"Can't you?"

His eyes, with their inscrutable expression, rested on her; and then shifted their glance to the silky sable head of Mrs. Aylmer's little half-grown Pekinese, which was trying to scramble on to her lap.

"I suppose everyone hopes that's true of themselves," he said slowly. "And I fancy the man who's most strongly convinced of it has reached the moment when he'd be wiser to watch his step. Can I get you some more tea?"

His voice had altered completely with the last sentence, and Clover had a curious subconscious feeling that someone had opened a door and then shut it in her face.

"Yes, please," she said a little flatly, and handing over her cup stooped to pick up Choo, who wriggled ecstatically in her grasp, his comical mask wrinkled up, his big round eyes goggling at her.

Any man who heard Clover Willoughby talk to a dog or a baby, saw a side of her which he would never have glimpsed otherwise. Her crisp voice took on the most adorably caressing note, her whole expression softened beyond imagining.

"You absurd little beast!" she said. "With such an enormous brain pan and not an idea in it beyond cake. Ah, you heard that, did you?" as the wriggles suddenly accelerated. *"Cake,* my Choo! Sit up and beg for it, then."

She deposited him on the floor again and made him sit up—with his little white forepaws drooping against his broad chest, and his feathery ears spread out fan-wise on each side of the round head that was carried with such diminutive stateliness.

Lady Angela's Sealyham puppy, which lay on the hearth rug, yawned, stretched itself and rising, trotted briskly over to the ottoman. Clover fed them both impartially.

"Though you don't either of you deserve it," she said. "You've distracted everyone's attention the whole afternoon and made horrid little nuisances of yourselves; and I'm not at all sure you'll be allowed into the smoking-room again after tea. Perhaps if you ask the stage-manager very nicely . . ."

She picked up the Peke, and held him out to Karslake, who had just brought back her tea-cup and put it on the little table beside her.

"Now then, tell the kind gentleman you're sorry, and you'll be as quiet as a little mouse if he lets you stay with us."

The Peke wagged his tail feverishly and wriggled. That breed of dog reaches a mental *rapport* with its human friends that is almost uncanny. Choo seemed actually to understand what was expected of him and every inch of his nervous, excitable little body seemed tense with entreaty.

Karslake made no movement towards taking the dog. One would have said he eyed the little creature with something not unlike distaste; and when Clover, not to be gainsaid, imperiously thrust Choo into his hands, he held the dog away from him, staring at it in unappreciative silence. His beautifully cut lips hardened into oddly cruel lines, the pupils of his light eyes contracted. Never had that suggestion of the waiting, watching animal been more marked in him.

The luckless Peke, finding that his advances met with worse than no response, cast a beseeching back-flung glance at Clover, the whites of his great soft eyes showing fearfully. Every vestige of wag left his tail, all the joyous

life was damped clean out of him and his little body hung limply in those strong brown fingers. One would have said that the tiny creature sensed the sinister presence of some undefined danger close to him.

"Why, I don't believe you like dogs!" Clover cried reproachfully as she caught back her hostess's shivering pet. Karslake seemed to pull himself together with an effort. He smiled.

"Pekes are hardly real dogs, are they?" he said, as though he felt that his odd manner needed some justification. "And it's Choo who doesn't like *me*."

"Of course he doesn't, poor little beast," she retorted. "He's not accustomed to be scowled at like that."

Later, in the smoking-room, she said to Bevis Aylmer, who had come in to look on, and was sitting a little apart from the rest:

"One would have thought that Choo was some kind of poisonous reptile!" A troubled perplexity swamped the indignation in her tone. "Really, I wouldn't have been much surprised if he'd deliberately dropped the poor little creature!"

"And stamped on him," added Bevis.

He had been an interested witness of the incident, but his own voice now held a barely suppressed satisfaction. He was thinking that if any man had ever put himself badly in the wrong with a woman who was inclined to like him, Juan Karslake had just done that thing. And he, the rival, rejoiced accordingly.

Bevis himself could understand a slightly contemptuous indifference towards the toy breed of dog. But Choo had funny taking little ways; and though the young man often roused his mother's remonstrances by teasing her pet into a hysterical torrent of shrill yaps, on the whole he regarded the Peke with indulgent amusement. Kars-

lake's expression as he eyed the little animal had actually startled him.

"I can't understand it," Clover repeated for about the fourth time, in a low troubled voice. "I simply can't understand it. It's so odd for a man not to be fond of dogs; and from something Nick said the other day, I certainly thought Mr. Karslake was. Didn't Nick say that his cousin protested against his thrashing Spottie when they were out shooting? Nick, of all people, who would never hurt anything unless he were obliged to!"

"He probably didn't protest out of consideration for the animal's feelings," Bevis said. "That's a valuable dog of Nick's. He may have realised that if his own dog had annoyed him he'd have half killed it, and judged Nick by himself."

"Oh . . . but . . ." Clover exclaimed in suppressed dismay, "you're making him out to be a monster, Bevis!"

He flushed.

"Well, I suppose some fellers are from the ordinary decent point of view," he defended himself. "If it wasn't so, the papers wouldn't get hold of those yarns of abnormal brutalities they print sometimes. And from those that find their way into print, you can guess the quantity that don't. Of course, in the ordinary course of things, the little bounder who pulls legs off flies and bullies the smaller brats at school, is just going through a phase; but with a few of 'em it's ingrained. And those are the chaps that ride a horse to death or maim a disobedient dog. Spaniards aren't animal lovers, anyhow; and he's half a Spaniard."

Clover's eyes carried consternation in their blue depths, as she gazed at him half incredulously. Bevis was undoubtedly overdoing it a little. Jealousy seldom makes a man any fairer towards his rival than the same quality does in a woman; and a man's frankness is unhampered

by the woman's traditional fear of being called a "cat." In this instance, however, his very insistence defeated his own purpose. Clover began to wonder whether she, too, wasn't taking an exaggerated view. She encouraged that wonder. After all, it was natural to feel disappointed and upset if a pleasant acquaintance betrayed unlovable qualities; but she had a vague suspicion that the thing disturbed her even more than it had any right to. She wasn't merely desirous of being proved in the wrong; she was very keenly anxious to be. And, as it happened, before the evening was over, her opinion of Karslake had swung round again like a weathercock.

Being astonishingly devoid of conceit for a girl of her marked attractions, it didn't enter her head that a man who had noticed her surprised disapproval of him would naturally seize the first opportunity to retrieve any error he had made.

When Lady Angela's irrepressible puppy, pursued shrilly by Choo, dashed on to the improvised stage, dragging his mistress' silk scarf, and proceeded to entangle himself among the actors' feet, it was Karslake who caught him and gently detached the scarf from the sharp little teeth, while the puppy growled and hung on delightedly, and shook his obstinate little head.

"Oh, Bones, you little devil!" his fond owner apostrophized him vigorously. "Here, give him to me, Mr. Karslake. I'll hold him."

"I think not, dear lady," Karslake said firmly, but he caressed the rough head as he spoke. "I don't fancy he's going to be of any assistance whatever in your scene with Loftus."

"I'll take them both to the old schoolroom," Ruth intervened decidedly. "They won't disturb anybody there, and it isn't often that Choo gets another young thing to play with that's not overwhelmingly large. The

setter pups bowl him over so and hurt his little feelings."

Karslake handed over the delinquent and the rehearsal went on, but Clover, who had noticed his gentleness with the obstinate puppy, told herself happily that she and Bevis had both been mistaken in their previous impression; they had read something quite imaginary into the man's expression; his thoughts had probably been far away.

There were frequent moments when she had noticed this happening with Karslake. All of a sudden one became aware that the courteously interested person speaking to one was only a shell; that the real Juan Karslake was miles away, back, perhaps, in that past of his which was a sealed book to his present acquaintances.

The rehearsal proceeded without the disturbing canine element, and Karslake threw himself into his duties as stage-manager with a keenness that was in marked contrast to that curious impression which he often conveyed, of not thinking anything worth while being keen about. Politely interested, or idly entertained—yes; but to anyone who watched him closely it was generally as though he had said in turn to every occupation and amusement that offered itself to a rich man:—"*A qui bono?* Why not this as well as another?"

Presently Clover forgot the whole incident that had disturbed her. If nothing else had put it out of her head her interest in Karslake's acting would have done so. The man was a born actor; even the Skipper grudgingly admitted it. Not content with merely suggesting improvements and alterations, he was ready to take every part in turn and prove his point by ocular demonstration. And in each case it was extraordinary how, without the slightest self-consciousness or any make-up to help the illusion, he sank himself in the character he was portraying—whether it were that of an irritable elderly man, a femi-

nine social climber, a conventional young diplomat, or a tragic butterfly of a woman fighting an unscrupulous adventurer for her happiness and her position.

This last was Lady Angela's part, and she was undoubtedly the best material that Karslake had to work on, though Lindham's rendering of a crabby, retired Colonial Governor was quite a presentable performance. The Skipper was an old stager.

Clover's own part—that of the ingénue—was a comparatively small one, Mrs. Mordaunt and Lady Angela having the chief women's *rôles;* but she became so absorbed in watching, that Bevis, bored, and sulky at her lack of attention to himself, departed to the schoolroom, which was used now-a-days as the gun-room, and worked off some of his bad temper in cleaning his gun.

He had put it away and was smoking and reading before the fire in one of the shabby comfortable armchairs, with the two little dogs stretched on the hearthrug at his feet, blinking contentedly at the red glow, when Lady Angela came in. She had ostensibly snatched a moment from the rehearsal to see how Bones was conducting himself.

"Rehearsal over?" he asked her.

"Not quite. Ruth and the Skipper are doing that bit in the third act again, where Sir John catches Margaret eavesdropping." She sank on to her knees on the hearthrug and stroked the puppy's warm little body. "Bones, my precious, it was a *shame* to kick two little dogs out, wasn't it? And poor master too . . . Bevis, I think you're *very* forbearing to let us monopolise your smoking-room like this."

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It's very comfortable here," he said. Across his mind flashed the question, why wasn't it Clover who had sought him out instead of Angela? Clover also must be off the

stage at the present moment. And again, on the top of that ungrateful thought—Angela was really rather a dear! It had been entirely by his own choice that he wasn't taking any part in the theatricals, but it was true, nevertheless, that he felt a little bit out of it; and a pricking conscience told him that the one person who was sparing a thought to his convenience was also a person whom he himself often treated most cavalierly.

He didn't remind himself that the woman who reverses the natural order of things and becomes the hunter instead of the hunted, rather invites that treatment. It had never entered his head that her barefaced manœuvres were prompted by anything more serious than an insatiable flirtatiousness.

She took out her cigarette case and nestled further down on to the hearthrug in an attitude of relaxed ease. It was a very effective attitude. Lady Angela was one of those women whose limp slenderness gives the impression of their being constructed entirely without bones.

"Want a match?"

"Yes, please."

She twisted herself round, tilting her head back, as her shoulders rested lightly against his knee. Bevis struck a match and lit the cigarette between her parted lips. The firelight made a nimbus of her pale yellow hair and flickered over her upturned face and the long smooth lines of her throat. An attractive little devil, Angela! And there was frank invitation in her pose and in the glance which met his under the down dropped lids of her long green eyes. Deliberately she took the cigarette from between her lips and blew a little cloud of smoke at him, smiling.

Bevis—at odds with the world because of another woman's treatment—responded, manlike, to the methods of this one. With a low, short laugh, he stooped down

and kissed her; and she, putting up her arms and interlacing her clinging fingers behind his head, returned his kiss. He felt no smallest qualms; why should he? no uncomfortable consciousness that he was taking advantage of his position as her host. She had clearly asked for it; and if any woman was capable of looking after herself, it was she! So he slipped his arm more closely round her as she leant against him, and kissed her again and again, brushing his lips against the soft warmth of her throat, lingering on the softer velvet of her mouth. It was quite pleasant and soothing . . . No, not perhaps exactly *soothing* . . . There was, one couldn't deny, a certain thrill about it.

As for Lady Angela, she had no illusions. He didn't care for her, and she knew it. She was well aware of the fact that she was only a stop-gap—and the knowledge was humiliating. But she told herself doggedly that many a woman has won a man before now by a tactful admixture of unobtrusive sympathy and persistent physical appeal; many a stop-gap has become firmly wedged into its place.

So she accepted the invidious position stoically, consoling herself with the fact that his ignorance of her own feelings saved the situation.

CHAPTER V

If Juan Karslake had any prejudices against lapdogs, it seemed that he did not extend that prejudice to the larger breeds.

Storrington walked up to the Hall one morning to get his cousin's official approval of some repairs that were needed to one of the cottages. He had put in an appearance there more often than formerly since the latter's protestations, but he generally managed to have some business to transact as a reason for it, some excuse for visiting the house in which he had once expected to live.

On this occasion, as he entered the hall under the ægis of the butler, a huge Alsatian wolfhound, at full length on the rug before the fire, raised his wise, alert head from between his paws, and stared at him with a steady curiosity—not precisely hostile, but with the air of a cautious newcomer taking his bearings of the company in which he found himself.

Nick snapped his fingers ingratiatingly.

"Hullo, old man, where did you come from?" he demanded, in the friendly voice which most dogs respond to with ready amiability. But this particular dog didn't. His pointed ears remained erect, his bright yellow eyes abated none of their questioning aloofness.

"Better not touch him, sir," Saunders said hastily, eyeing the big recumbent brute with some nervousness. "We've got two of them here now, and Mr. Karslake's orders was, to leave them strictly alone. This breed of dog don't take easily to strangers, it seems; and the master's not anxious, anyhow, for them to make friends

with anyone unless he gives them leave, so to speak. They're to be watch-dogs, so I understand, sir."

Karslake himself came into the hall at that moment, accompanied by a duplicate edition of the dog on the hearthrug. It followed closely at his heels, a smoothly moving, formidable shape—its strong muscles rippling under its thick hide, its big paws making a rhythmic padding sound on the stone flags.

"Just the person I wanted to see." He greeted his visitor. "Here, Castor,"—at the sound of his voice uplifted in sharp command, the animal on the rug heaved itself swiftly to its feet,—"come here and be introduced. This is a *friend,* old boy, and we don't question his comings and goings. *A friend.* Got that, Pollux?"

Both animals approached Nick and sniffed at his coat and his hands while he stood perfectly still, watching them with half amused interest, as they took thorough stock of him.

"Pleased to meet you," he remarked blandly, "but certainly only under those conditions. You've got a pretty efficient bodyguard here, Karslake!"

The other patted the animals' heads as they returned to him. Their ears flattened under the caressing fingers —and they stood passive, casting mute upward glances at him. Their long jaws, their whole stealthy powerful frames betokened the wolf; but those submissive glances were doglike in their single-minded fidelity.

"As a matter of fact, they've been properly trained, and they're not in the least savage to anyone who doesn't resist them or meddle with them," their new owner said. "I got them from a fellow who breeds them. They're a one-man dog, that's all; not effusive to anyone whose rights they don't recognise. I drove over to the fellow's place yesterday and fetched them."

Nick surveyed the formidable looking pair whimsically.

"Better give an 'at home' to meet 'em, and introduce the neighbourhood," he suggested. "Make things safer, won't it?"

Karslake frowned. Nick's suggestion seemed to annoy him. At once it seemed to the other man that there was a subtle affinity between him and his two latest acquisitions. Three pairs of amber eyes glowed steadily. He wasn't a nervous man, but an odd feeling of discomfort assailed him.

"I tell you they're not dangerous," Karslake said impatiently. "They know already that I'm their master, and they won't touch anybody,—in the daytime at least, —unless I order them to."

"That's good hearing," Storrington remarked ironically. "Going to make house-pets of them?"

"They'll be about the house more or less in the daytime, but at night they'll sleep on the *loggia* outside the conservatory, and have the run of the grounds."

"So that if I found it necessary to come up and see you some evening on business that wouldn't wait, I might expect friend Castor or Pollux at my throat?" Storrington questioned mildly.

"My dear fellow, don't be absurd! They won't touch anyone they know; and once the gates in front of the house are closed for the night, they'll be shut in to the gardens and the loggia."

"Well, I'm glad you warned me," the other laughed. "At the present moment, I'll take your word for it that they wouldn't welcome me with open jaws; but all the same I can see myself legging it for the summerhut, with one of these household pets of yours hot on my trail, the next time a moonlit night tempts me to a stroll beyond my own domains."

Karslake turned on him sharply.

"*Do* you ever do that?" he asked. "Walk round the place at night, I mean? Have you done it lately?"

Nick stared at him.

"At this time of the year? Good Lord, no! I'm neither a poacher nor a keeper nor a policeman; my own fireside is good enough for me in January. Why?"

Karslake was silent a moment, while the other waited curiously. Then he seemed to take a sudden resolution.

"Because if *you* don't, someone else does," he said. "Come on up to my room and I'll show you what I mean."

He turned and led the way swiftly across the hall, up the broad shallow stairs and down a wide corridor. As he paused at one of the doorways, Storrington, mystified by his manner, exclaimed in some surprise.

"You've changed your room, then?"

"Yes, I didn't care for that huge barrack, and besides I hate a balcony. This looks out on the other side of the house and it hasn't got one. Also, it has another door, opening on to a side staircase, a thing I always like."

"Useful in case of fire," Storrington commented in a non-committal voice.

It was a good-sized room which they entered, even if compared with the majority of the vast bedrooms on the first floor it was comparatively small. The furniture was solid; the decorations,—wallpaper, heavy maroon window-curtains, and dull framed engravings,—were still as they had been for the last fifty years. Some of the bedrooms had seen no alteration for an even longer period. In many respects the house needed redecorating. Karslake had contented himself with spending money lavishly on the stables, and he didn't stint it in the style in which he lived, or in any improvements to the estate, though in this last it was true that his interest seemed to be purely perfunctory. But perhaps it was scarcely to be wondered

at that he showed no inclination to re-decorate the empty suites of rooms for which he seemed to have no use. They had remained empty since his arrival.

In his present room there were three long windows deep set in the wall with panelled shutters folded back on each side. The two men, standing together in the embrasure of one of them, looked out on a formal garden of lawns and box-edged paths, from which slopes of close-cut turf rose in terraces, reached by flights of stone steps. Statues and low stone balustrades showed against the yew trees and gleamed here and there through the leafless shrubs; and through an opening in a quaintly clipped hedge, the topmost flight of steps led up to a summer-house that crowned a steep mound. It was built on classic lines, after the fashion of the eighteenth century, with pillars and circular stone-seated recesses on each side of its arched doorway.

"I went to bed late, one night last week," Karslake said. "Two o'clock or thereabouts. These shutters were closed; but the fancy took me to open them and look out. I don't know why. Why does one do anything, if it comes to that? It was a clear night, plenty of stars. I could see the outline of that rising ground against the sky, and the roof of the summer-house. And then a light flashed in the summer-house and went out. The tiniest speck of light, that was all; as though some one were lighting a cigarette, or . . . or signalling to some one else. I waited a little while at the window, and it didn't come again. Then I closed the shutters, waited a second, threw them open sharply. There it was again; and again it went out. I waited a little longer, but saw nothing." He paused. "What would you have done in my place?" he asked.

Storrington's quizzical expression was more accentuated than usual as he returned the other's glance.

"Closed the shutters and gone to bed," he said, smiling. "If you mean," he added, "would I have gone downstairs and out, and made a bad third at an assignation between one of my men servants and a housemaid—no, emphatically I would not!"

Karslake nodded thoughtfully. The sarcastic inflection in the other's tone escaped him or gave no offence.

"That's the explanation that would have suggested itself to you?" he said interrogatively. "Perhaps you're right. It's a late hour to choose, though, and I can imagine better spots for a rendezvous, particularly as I gather that the housekeeper's room looks out this way, and I should say that the old lady's a bit of a dragon."

Storrington laughed.

"Well, the lovers would be safe enough at that hour, I should think," he said easily. "I can't imagine Mrs. Henslow admiring the view from her window at two a. m."

"Perhaps not," Karslake agreed. He seemed most disproportionately in earnest about the matter, and his companion's flippancy didn't apparently really shake his own private opinion, whatever it was. That it didn't tally with Storrington's was at least evident. "Well, I fancy the lady didn't keep the appointment, or if she did, her swain had to wait for her a very long time. You'll agree with me that a man who finds a woman willing to make an assignation with him in the middle of a winter's night, is likely to find something more amusing to do with his time,—and hers,—than to smoke a packetful of cigarettes."

"How do you know he did?"

"I saw the cigarette ends next morning," Karslake said; " by a curious coincidence, I had strolled round the garden with Fairlie the day before and I happened to glance into the hut and to notice how uncommonly tidy the gardeners kept the place; not a twig or leaf had

drifted in, and the floor had clearly been swept not long before. Well, the cigarettes I found next morning must have been smoked since then. There was a quantity of ash, too, on one of the window-sills."

"It does sound an odd sort of thing for anyone to do at this time of the year," Nick admitted. "Has it only happened once?"

"It's happened three nights in all," Karslake said. "Once I saw the light at twelve o'clock, once a little while earlier."

"And you've made no inquiries?"

"Who the devil could one ask? Mrs. Henslow? She's hardly likely to have been a party to it if it *were* one of the maids."

"No," Nick agreed. "And none of them are likely to own up and run the risk of getting sacked for a light-minded huzzy. And that's that. Frankly I don't see, unless you lay in wait for him or her or they, how you're going to find out. If it was one of the men . . . I say, what about a poacher waiting to take up his snares? That spinney on the other side of the mound simply swarms with rabbits. Its infernal cheek if it *is* a poacher coming so near the house. He'd have to climb the park wall too, now that all the gates are locked, but a poacher would probably be well up in all the places where that would be a more or less easy job." He broke off short, thoughtfully surveying the punishing jaws of the great, silent-footed brute who had followed them into the room. "Look here, I'd better let the village know that any trespasser stands the risk of being badly mauled. You don't want an unpleasant fatality, if you can help it. The authorities are getting very pernickety about Alsatians, —almost stingy, one might say, over their miserable ration of one dog, one bite!"

"If you think it's worth it," Karslake said indifferently.

He dismissed the subject with an abrupt finality that might have made Nick almost fancy that the whole fantastic story,—the mysterious light and the exaggerated importance he seemed to attach to it,—was a figment of his own imagination, if it hadn't been for the tangible presence of that grim guardian of the Danesthorpe Hall peace padding softly down the stairs behind him. That memory followed him home through the park.

If Karslake didn't intend to give the neighbourhood notice of his new acquisitions, he—Nick—must certainly do so. Amazing fellow, Karslake. The Skipper, of course, would at once see in this apparent callousness a fresh proof of that foreign blood of his. Nick knew better. He had studied his own family pedigree and had applied a close analysis to the stock from which he had sprung. The Karslake side of his ancestry had always outweighed in his estimation his Storrington descent. It was only to be expected that it should be so,—born and bred as he had been on Karslake land, living through the most impressionable years of his life under the shadow of the big house. He knew that there had been surprising instances of ruthlessness in many of the dead and gone Karslakes; a hard-headed, hard-driving, one-ideaed quality that was apt to cut out the gentler virtues and ride roughshod over all that stood in the way of an obsession or ambition.

Hadn't old Robert his share of that quality? Late in life the obsession of repairing a wrong had taken him, and the great-nephew he had known since a child had gone to the wall for a comparative stranger,—apparently without a qualm. Hadn't old Josiah Karslake, the founder of the house, amassed his fortune at the expense of wretched negro-slaves, of badly found sailing ships and starved and bullied crews? And there were other instances . . .

Nick Storrington was under no illusions as to his Kars-

lake heritage. It may have been for that very reason that he himself erred deliberately on the side of quixotry.

That same morning, while he was down in the village, giving orders for the repairs that Karslake had sanctioned, he dropped in at the Karslake Arms and had a seemingly casual talk with the publican over a glass of beer. There is no better starting point for rumours or genuine information than the inn of any village. When he left, he knew that the fact of the Hall grounds being policed nightly by two powerful dogs of uncertain temper would soon be as widely known in the neighbourhood as if it had been broadcast on the wireless.

His own household, as he found, on coming home for lunch, needed no warning.

Martin, who had a reputation for being almost as knowledgeable about horses as any qualified vet, had been up to the Hall stables, in consultation with the head-groom there, over one of Karslake's hunters. He had, *en passant,* inspected the Alsatians, whom he pronounced, with the stolid unconcern of a man who had lived all his life in charge of dogs and horses, "fine, upstanding beasts, that he wouldn't care to be falling foul of in the dark."

Mrs. Martin, on the other hand, appearing in the doorway of the saddle room, waxed eloquent on the subject of "savage brutes, as ought to be kept on the chain, Mr. Nicholas, and so they ought."

Mrs. Martin often spent an evening playing whist with her cronies in the comfortable servants' quarters at the Hall, leaving Martin, who preferred his pipe and his football news, to his armchair at home. But now,—

"Not a step do I take outside of an evening without Martin," said she firmly. "Not with them rampageous monsters about the place."

"You'll have to enlist Albert as your escort, Mrs.

Martin," Nick chaffed her. "Nothing like having two strings to your bow."

"Ah, get on with your fun, Mr. Nick," the little woman said tolerantly. "Albert, he hasn't much use for company. He'd not be thanking me for dragging him out."

Albert, cleaning stirrups as though his life depended on their lustre, looked up and smiled deprecatingly. He was on very good terms with Mrs. Martin, particularly as the days passed by and she had asked no questions about that curious map in his coat pocket. What she had taken to be his first shyness had worn off, and she found him a "very obliging young fellow."

Martin grinned in his turn.

"Mebbe I wasn't thinking of that," he said slyly, "when I sent Albert up there as soon as I got back, with the embrocation for Gypsy. Introducing 'im like."

"Did you see either of the wolfhounds, Albert?" Nick asked curiously.

The rather wooden face of the new stable help was entirely devoid of expression.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Karslake was in the yard, talking to the head groom, and both the dogs were with him. The head groom said that now that they knew I belonged to the place, they'd be all right with me at any time if Martin should want to send me up on a message."

Storrington nodded.

"Did Mr. Karslake speak to you,—give you any message for me?" he asked.

"Not for you, sir." Albert looked up again. "He said, would I tell Martin he was much obliged to him for coming up to see the mare."

"H'm."

Storrington's comment as he stared thoughtfully at Albert might have meant anything. Might have meant, perhaps, that there was no end to the contradictions and

vagaries of this queer kinsman of his, who apparently didn't care a damn whether his formidable pets chewed up the entire village, and yet could spare thought to courteous acknowledgment of a servant's voluntary assistance.

He was on his way out of the yard when he paused.

"Martin," he asked, "has there been any talk lately about poaching up in the spinney at the top of the park near the gardens?"

"No, sir. Not that I know of."

"Ah. I was only wondering if McKay had said anything about it. Some snares were found there a year ago, you remember, and there are pheasants in that spinney as well as rabbits. Mr. Karslake tells me someone's been out there at night, last week, near the summer-hut."

" 'Ave they, sir? No, I 'adn't 'eard."

He seemed to be revolving the situation in his mind; but he said no more . . . to Storrington.

To Albert, who had just dropped with a jarring clang one of the stirrups he had been polishing, his remarks were terse and eloquent. Nick heard the faint echo of them as he went out of the yard.

CHAPTER VI

When hounds met at Chorton Ferrars, the field was generally a big one and the followers on foot and by car stood very little chance of seeing any sport—or spoiling it; for the nearest cover was two miles away and it was looked on as a sure find. Some of the best runs for two seasons had been provided by a stout old dog fox with a white tag to his brush, who lay up in Ferrars Copse.

The usual number of footpeople, however, generally turned up, attracted by the cheeriness of a lawn meet and the well-known hospitality of Chorton Ferrars.

Clover Willoughby swung her two-seater round the bend of the high laurel ledge that flanked the drive up to the house. She didn't hunt. For once Aunt Letty and the Skipper had been in accord. They had discouraged her from the start—Captain Lindham because he hated a hard-riding woman, and instinct told him that whatever Clover took up she would take up enthusiastically; Miss Cunliffe because she was terrified of the risks of the hunting field for her darling.

Clover had proved almost surprisingly docile. But she knew that every day which saw her out with hounds would see so many hours of purgatory for her Aunt; and also, being pretty level-headed, she realised that her income wouldn't run to expensive hunters, and that in this stiff country a woman, to ride safely and ride hard, needed to be well mounted. Clover Willoughby would want to be in the first flight or nowhere. If she had a serious fault, this charming young woman, it was that pride of hers. She wasn't in the least vain of her looks or her conquests;

they were things she never bothered to think about; but if she couldn't "go with the best" she preferred not to hunt at all. She wouldn't have people condescendingly offering to lend her mounts, advising her to "go round by the road . . ."

No. She could "go round by the road" and see quite a lot of the fun in her car.

Now she came out on to the wide gravel sweep where other cars were discharging their occupants to join the little crowd of riders, pedestrians, fidgeting horses, patient grooms, and footmen hurrying backwards and forwards with trays of liqueurs and sandwiches. At the further end, the various bright patches of colour that marked the passage of hunt coats through the throng were concentrated in a vivid splash of cheerful hue—the huntsman and whips keeping guard over a restless blur of white and tan. With waving sterns and eager, wistful faces, the hounds strayed here and there and were rounded up to the crack of a whip, the deep authoritative voices that called each by name.

Lord Belford, the owner of Chorton Ferrars, moved bareheaded from group to group, his fine clean-cut face radiating friendliness, his silver hair ruffled by the wind. His wife greeted Clover on the hall doorsteps—a tall, thin woman with a deep delightful voice, amazingly shabby clothes and an "air," who had once been the most popular of English ambassadresses.

"You're just in time, my dear; they're late moving off. In fact everybody's late this morning, and I see Charles has just buttonholed the master, so you've time for a cherry brandy and a *pâté de foie gras* sandwich."

She led the way into the hall, where a *buffet* had been set out and in front of a huge fire people were toasting their toes and sipping liqueurs. Most of the riding contingent were already mounted; but one or two lingered

gossiping, and Clover joined them, greeting and being greeted on all sides.

Miss Cunliffe generally motored with her on hunting-days, but to-day she was alone. It would be no good trying to follow for long, as the hounds would probably have found and got well away before the motoring contingent, keeping as in duty bound, at the rear, reached Ferrars Copse in their wake. Aunt Letty had decided that she had more amusing things to do at home. Last season Clover would probably have said the same. This season she hadn't missed a meet; nor, be it remarked, within five minutes of her arrival at those meets had her searching eyes ever missed the vivid brown overcoat which muffled the perfectly cut glories of Juan Karslake's hunting kit.

This morning she hadn't seen him outside, nor was he in the hall.

Nick Storrington was also missing. But the whole Aylmer party were there—Mrs. Aylmer having motored her guest over to the meet. As Clover came up, Bevis had just replenished Lady Angela's tiny glass of sloe gin.

"Jumping powder," the latter remarked gaily as she waved it at Clover. She always found it difficult to dislike her rival really venomously. There were such a lot of points about the girl that—as one woman to another—appealed to Angela Vyse. And on hunting days at least she had no need to fear the other's counter attractions. Those days were hers, more or less. Well mounted and well turned out, she looked and felt at her best, and her beautiful little thoroughbreds were generally to be seen in the vicinity of Bevis Aylmer's big weight-carriers. She came of a hard riding, sporting stock, and though she hadn't been left *too* well-off as a widow, she gave three hundred guineas a-piece for her hunters, and equalized matters by keeping only one servant in the pretty little

cottage the size of whose stables was certainly out of all proportion to it.

Major Fairlie, who was an indefatigable foot follower, loomed up at that moment, in the most ancient of Norfolk jackets and knickerbockers, with a neatly folded mackintosh and a pair of field glasses slung over his lean shoulder.

"I don't see those two fellows from Danesthorpe Hall anywhere," he remarked. "Nick's not late, as a rule; so perhaps he's not coming out. But I wonder whether he remembered to warn Karslake that it isn't safe to be late for this particular meet if one doesn't want to miss the chance of a good day."

"I didn't pass either of them on the road," Clover said with careful casualness, as though it were just the purest accident that she happened to be aware of that fact. "They'd be sure to be riding, wouldn't they? as it's so close."

"Well, Karslake's second horseman's outside," young Loftus cut in. At sight of Clover he had promptly deserted Lady Belford's pretty schoolgirl daughter and joined the little group. "So I imagine he must be coming."

"Unless, of course, those dear little pets of his have gone back to the wild and eaten him," suggested Mrs. Mordaunt.

"Does wolf eat wolf?" murmured Lady Angela under her breath.

There was a stir outside; the voices of the whips, a scattering of gravel under impatient hoofs, the sound of cars being started up, the jingle of bridles and creak of leather.

"Hounds are moving off," Fairlie said, "and I'm going to walk on. If you people don't want to be left behind . . ."

At which there was a hasty setting down of glasses and pulling on of gloves, and a general exodus.

Clover finished her cherry brandy and overtook Fairlie outside.

"Get in with me," she said. "I don't know yet whether I shall remain out or not, but I can drive you to Ferrars Copse."

They allowed the field to pass them and fell into line with the stream of second horsemen and those cars that weren't going straight home. A few belated riders overtook them *en route* to the covert; one bright chestnut came past at a swinging pace, its ears laid back, snatching at its bit. Its rider lifted his hat as he passed and called back something indistinguishable. Clover glimpsed a dark, laughing face, a flash of white teeth under the dark moustache; Juan Karslake, late, and evidently enjoying himself on an animal which certainly didn't look as though it would give him an armchair ride.

"Hullo!" Fairlie stared after him. "I didn't know there were any chestnuts in the Danesthorpe stables."

"There aren't," his companion told him. "I think that was Sparrowhawk, Nick's horse. Mr. Karslake told me he was going to try it. I expect that's what made him late, —changing saddles at the last moment."

But in one respect she was wrong, although she had made no mistake when she recognised the good-looking chestnut which Nick had spoken of selling. The experiment of trying a new bit on the animal hadn't proved a success. Sparrowhawk had bolted with the luckless Martin, within ten minutes of the latter's setting out to exercise him in the park, and the old groom narrowly escaped being brushed off against various low-lying branches before a steep rise in the ground had exhausted the brute, and he had allowed himself to be pulled up.

Nick, in consequence had never continued the experi-

ment in the hunting field as he had meant to do, and had decided to sell the animal.

But it wasn't the changing of a saddle which had delayed Karslake's start for the meet.

The arrangement had been made the night before; and Nick had promised to send Albert up to the Hall with the chestnut in good time. He himself, in the ordinary way of things, would also have ridden to the meet; but this morning he had a business appointment with one of the estate farmers, who was coming in early to see him; so he had decided to take the car, and Martin was to ride Kestrel on ahead and wait for him at the cross-roads by Ferrars Copse.

The chestnut had been led out of the yard, with the usual rounded back and laid-back ears, and that restless rolling eye which had always made Martin shake his head dubiously. Once mounted, there would be a flurry of heels, a buck or two, and then the animal would settle down perforce to his long smooth trot. As Nick had said, he was a good hunter,—ridden, *bien entendu,* in the gag bridle which the man who sold him had earnestly recommended. In any other, he was a hot-headed demon, and to all intents and purposes an uncontrollable one.

After Albert had led him out this morning, Martin emerged sedately on to the road on the ugly workmanlike bay that had carried his master well up for several seasons. Storrington finished his breakfast, interviewed and got rid of his client and was hastily looking through some papers when the clatter of hoofs on the cobbles of the yard outside his "office" window, made him look up to see that Albert was leading Sparrowhawk back into the yard again.

He threw up the window and called out,

"Hullo! Anything wrong?"

The man started at the sound of the unexpected voice.

When he had left the yard, he had fancied that his employer was starting out at once, as Martin had brought the car round to the front door. Now, although he was taken aback at finding Storrington still there, he was also glib.

"Martin's made a mistake, sir; put the wrong bridle on Sparrowhawk. I found it out before I got to the Hall and I've come back to change it."

"Oh, all right."

A queer thing for Martin to do, Storrington thought, as he turned away from the window. Martin was generally so reliable, and to send Sparrowhawk out for a trial hunt in the useless double-bridle was an unpardonable piece of carelessness.

He hastily skimmed through the papers he held. Damn careless of Martin. The clip-clop of the chestnut's hoofs as he was led out of the yard again interfered with the current of his thoughts. What was that clause that he had wanted to look up in the lease of the home-farm to Stoddart?

"Clip-clop" . . . growing fainter in the distance. He tossed the papers into a drawer, slammed and locked it and went out into the hall.

Karslake was a fine horseman, no doubt of it; but perfect hands cut no ice with brutes of the chestnut's type. Without the gag, you might as well be riding an equine Robot. And of what use the best seat in the world, in the crash that a mad runaway may finish up with?

Fifteen minutes later, booted, spurred, and muffled up in his overcoat, he stood in the saddle-room and stared at the bridle which lay on the table there, the bit still faintly flecked with foam from the chestnut's jaws. A sharp exclamation half escaped him, bitten off as it were at its source. *For it was the gag-bridle and not the other* which was holding his eyes riveted as though the fascina-

tion of some venomous snake lay in its narrow lengths of leather and its gleaming steel.

It would seem that it wasn't Martin who had made the mistake after all; it was his underling.

For a moment Nick stood motionless; then he swung round and re-entered the house. There was a telephone in his office and Karslake had recently had one installed in his own library. Nick took it up now and was through to the Hall in a few seconds.

"Hullo . . . Hullo! Is that you, Saunders? What . . . Just gone, has he? Damn! No . . . no, it doesn't matter; I'll see him at the meet."

He hung up the receiver and stood thinking. He wasn't easily flustered; there were as a rule, few cooler-headed men. But afterwards he openly cursed himself with a vigour that most people considered quite undeserved, for not having rung up the Hall again and sent Karslake's chauffeur off at top-speed to overtake his master and bring him back before he got to the meet. Yet there certainly seemed two excellent reasons why he shouldn't have done this. Firstly, that Albert's officious stupidity had already made Karslake late; and, autocratic as Storrington had discovered him to be in some ways, he would be very likely to resent this further delay, and would probably ignore the request altogether. Secondly, since he *was* late, Sparrowhawk's temper wouldn't at least be exposed to the extra fret of being kept waiting about in the cold at a crowded meet, and it was quite on the cards that the beast would give no trouble until hounds got away. Before that Storrington himself would have overtaken his cousin, and the exchange of bridles could be made without any unnecessary fuss.

Certainly it seemed a reasonable way of looking at

things. He fetched the gag-bridle, put it in at the back of his car and drove off.

But the Fates which had brought Albert Bonnin to Danesthorpe Hall, with that curious map in his pocket and a Belgian name that didn't match the mutterings of his delirium, ordained that Nick shouldn't reach Ferrars Copse that morning in time to see the old white-tagged fox steal out from the hazel undergrowth and slip away across the grass. Hounds tumbled pellmell out of the covert; the clear cold air was full of the babble of their excited music. Half a dozen distant voices took up the cry, *"Gone away!"*

Sparrowhawk, feeling the grip of firm knees behind his shoulders and the gathering up of the slack reins on his neck, laid back his wicked ears, chewed the useless bit between the strong yellow teeth, and plunged tentatively.

CHAPTER VII

Clover brought her car to a standstill in a by-road that mounted the slope of a hill commanding a wonderful view of the country between Ferrars Copse and the distant village of Staveleigh.

She stood up in the car and took out her field glasses to scan the wide stretch of grass and plough dotted by scattered farmhouses and little spinneys.

She was alone. Major Fairlie had left her at Ferrars Copse and her last glimpse of him had been striding rapidly across a field towards a spur of rising ground from which he could more or less follow the movements of the field, bunched together in sheltered corners outside the covert.

Then hounds had found almost at once, and a little party of second horsemen had clattered past the waiting cars and called out that the hunt was heading for Staveleigh.

Clover, as she had told Fairlie, hadn't really meant to follow. But it was a lovely day; the thrill of the chase gripped her . . . and something else. If the fox was making for Staveleigh woods, one would see most of the fun from just beyond a bridge that spanned the little stream flowing down Staveleigh hill. And if hounds should lose their fox or kill before they reached Staveleigh, there was a covert close by that bridge which they would probably draw.

Clover, who had never perhaps quite realized how many men had laid careful plans at one time or another with a view to securing a moment or two with the elusive

Miss Willoughby, attributed her own sudden resolution to take up her position just beyond that covert, to anything in the world but the hope of exchanging a few brief words with a certain man on a borrowed chestnut horse, whose mount had seemed to be giving him a good deal of trouble when she had last seen him outside Ferrars Copse.

The extraordinary far-reaching stillness of a clear winter's day lay over everything. Every little sound that broke it seemed to stand out against it with a kind of faint, mellow unreality. The barking of a distant farm dog, the crowing of a cock, indistinguishable words shouted across a field by one labourer to another. Some yards away, a group of second horses, ridden by keen-eyed grooms, fidgeted on the turf by the side of the road, and not far off the Manor car and one or two others had pulled up. The voices of their occupants floated back to her.

"There they go! . . . do you see them? Not running, surely, are they? No . . . Oh, bad luck! they've lost him."

Over the brow of a distant hill slipped the hounds, drifting like speckled white feathers over the rich plough, the huntsman cheering them on, and behind them the field following slowly. It was too far away to distinguish individuals clearly, even with the glasses. But the master's grey was conspicuous and Bevis Aylmer's big dun. There had been several chestnuts out. . . .

A clatter of hoofs behind struck hollow as they crossed the bridge; some late comer sending his horse along in a desperate hurry. She turned and recognised him.

"Hullo, Nick! You're in luck's way, picking them up like this."

"Over there, are they?" He reined in beside the car.

"Some damn fool," he said, "told me they'd gone left-handed for Three Springs. Where's Karslake?"

"He passed me on the way to the covert," she said. "I haven't seen him since. What's made you so late?"

He laughed, but his laugh was short and vexed.

"I think my staff have gone demented this morning," he said. "To begin with, I lent my chestnut to Karslake, and that new fellow of mine took the brute up to the Hall in an ordinary double bridle instead of the gag which I always hunt him in. I only discovered it after he'd left the stable, and I tried to get Karslake on the telephone, but he'd started. Then one of them forgot to fill up my petrol tank, and the infernal car conked out halfway to Chorton Ferrars, and no one came by who was of any use for nearly twenty minutes."

He swung his horse round as he spoke and put him at the low hedge. "With any luck I'll reach them before they move off," he said; and the next moment was over and cantering down the field on the other side.

"They're moving now," she called out warningly after him, as almost on the same instant a faint whimpering was borne to her from the distance. It gained in joyous volume as hounds took up the scent once more with melodious clamour and a stir of animation ran through the various groups silhouetted against the pale skyline. The stir quickened; a gleam of red flashed against a blackthorn hedge; another . . . now a black coat, then a dark blue habit . . . more red coats. Hounds were in full cry again and the field streaming out behind them.

They were veering slightly this way, and presently she saw Nick, who knew every yard of the country, bear to the right, making heavy weather over the plough, but taking a short cut that would, she calculated, allow him to cut in at the tail of hounds, level with the leading horsemen.

The going was fast; hounds were rattling their fox along at a screaming pace, and she had a wonderful bird's-eye view of the country from this high stretch of road. She could see for miles; but with her glasses to her eyes she was focussing all her attention on the foremost riders. There was a bright chestnut, ridden by a man in a red coat, close to the master's grey. That might be Karslake; yes, it *was*. The chestnut had a white stocking; that was Sparrowhawk. How tiresome that Nick hadn't been just a few moments earlier! Could anything be more annoying to a man who was more or less new to the country like Juan Karslake, than to be a "passenger" on a crowded day, barging into his neighbours, rushing his fences, crowding at gates! Sparrowhawk, if he were as hotheaded as Nick seemed to have found him, would probably commit all these crimes, when ridden in an ordinary hunting bridle.

He was passing the master now; it wasn't often that Colonel Ledway let himself be cut down by his field. The master had a reputation to keep up as the very devil of a thruster; and he was getting to the age when most men cling jealously to that reputation.

Past him tore the chestnut . . . he would be in among the hounds if he wasn't careful, at the pace he was going. A sudden misgiving seized Clover,—something more than the natural anxiety that a man in whom she was interested shouldn't commit the unpardonable sin of over-riding the hounds. She couldn't take her eyes off that distant flashing streak of horseflesh, and her nervousness grew. The brute must have taken complete charge. If Karslake had any control at all, he surely would pull right out before he did any damage? The chestnut *must* have bolted; not a doubt of it. He was alone now with hounds, a solitary figure; the rest of the field had swerved and were

making for a gate. Then, faint and thin, a distant shout drifted to her.

"Wire . . . hold hard! . . . wire!"

Her glasses shook in her hands as a gasp of horrid realization broke from her. Her heart seemed literally to stop beating.

Hounds were slipping in a swift wave through that innocent seeming hedge and out the other side, flashing on to the heavy brown furrows of the plough, hunting their fox alone with a grim determination; quite alone, now; no mad horseman on their heels. . . .

The voices in the neighbouring cars penetrated Clover's stunned consciousness like voices in a dream.

"Someone's come to grief . . . a man . . . did you see?" It was Mrs. Aylmer speaking. "It wasn't Bevis, was it?"

"No; I can pick him out close to that small tree." Mrs. Mordaunt was swiftly reassuring, and Clover bit her lip savagely to steady herself, as she watched the spot where the chestnut had charged the hedge, crashed blindly through it and turned a complete somersault into the ditch beyond.

It wasn't the first accident she had seen by a long chalk. Empty saddles or fallen horses weren't such uncommon things that one worked oneself into any state about them in the ordinary course of things. The sequel to the one was generally a wrathful man on foot, chasing his steed; to the other, a speedy remounting, jamming on of crushed hat and off again. Why must her imagination run riot in this instance? She didn't ask herself the question consciously; one doesn't, after all, analyse one's sensations when one is making startling personal discoveries about oneself. One's breath is taken away; thoughts are chaotic. Only sensation remains acute,—terrifyingly acute.

Was it moving,—that vague blur of scarlet and brown and white—or did she merely fancy that it had stirred?

A ploughman left his horses on the slope beyond and ran down towards the hedge. And now the field streamed through the gate, and several among them, good Samaritans, pulled back out of the hunt, and cantered across to the scene of the accident. From another quarter came Nick, galloping up the sticky plough; and overhauling him, some way behind, one of the second horsemen who had been fidgeting a few moments ago on the road.

Just as they reached the little group of dismounted men, there was a sudden increase of movement among them and a vigorous upheaval. The chestnut was out of the ditch and on his legs, blown, shaking,—the devil knocked out of him for once. But his rider . . .

The girl in the car could have shrieked aloud in her agonized suspense. How many men had there been around the ditch a moment or two ago? Five, surely . . . hadn't it been five? Yes, the sixth was Nick, of course. *Was* it only six? Wasn't there a seventh?—a slim man, hatless, in stained and dishevelled scarlet, limping a little stiffly, as he moved away . . .

Clover Willoughby sat suddenly down, feeling weak about the knees. It had just been an ordinary hunting accident; a man pinned down under his horse in a ditch, a man whom she'd only known for seven months and about whom for a short while quite lately she had begun to wonder if there wasn't something that she didn't quite like; a man, moreover, who had paid her very little more than the ordinary attentions.

And she had made an absolute idiot of herself! Thank Heaven, there had been no one in the car with her to see it. She felt thoroughly ashamed . . . ashamed and thrilled and completely *bouleversé* with the novelty and

strangeness of this thing that had happened to her. For some time she had tacitly accepted the fact that she differed from most of the girls she knew, in that she wasn't always just emerging from one love affair and on the verge of another. She had never been in love, and it never entered her head to view any fresh man whom she met in the light of a possible adorer. When he revealed himself to be so, she took him for granted under that aspect, and was neither elated nor responsive; the average man didn't make enough impression upon her for her to do more than just realize regretfully that he had become "tiresome." But Juan Karslake was undoubtedly different; he *had* made an impression on her. At first when her imagination had developed an absurd trick of conjuring up his face before her at odd moments, she had put it down to his unusual type of good looks. As a portrait in a picture gallery stands out from the rest, so his dark, clearly cut features, and what Lady Angela had described as his "eyes of a haunted devil," had impressed themselves on her mind. That was what she had thought.

And now it seemed that all this while she had been falling in love, not as she had always imagined she would fall in love one day, with a man whose past record was an open book, whose looks were of little moment beside his character—but in the most puerile schoolgirl fashion, with a caressing voice, a dark, sombre face which could be lit to actual beauty by its quick, rare smile, but which once at least she had seen harden into an expression that repelled and half-frightened her.

"I'm a fool . . . a fool!" she stormed inwardly, as she forced herself to rise again and look once more through the glasses, gripping them tightly to steady the shaking of her hands, at the little distant group of men and horses.

It was breaking up now. The other men were mount-

ing and galloping on after the hunt, and Nick and his cousin were riding back at a leisurely pace towards the road. Karslake had changed on to his second horse, and his groom was following on the now completely subdued chestnut.

"That looked like nearly being a bad accident." A voice close beside her made Clover start. Mrs. Mordaunt had left the Manor car and walked back along the road to speak to her. "Who was it? We could only see that it wasn't Bevis, anyway, thank goodness."

"It was Mr. Karslake," Clover told her; and added hastily that she had recognised the horse as one which Nick Storrington had lent to his cousin. A quite unnecessary explanation. She wouldn't have made it a couple of hours ago, and she bit her lip in impatient vexation.

The three men rode up the field towards them, and Mrs. Mordaunt went forward to open the gate which Nick in his previous hurry, had ignored. Clover remained where she was; this new and maddening self-consciousness held her in its grip. It wasn't till Nick pulled up beside her that she had got herself sufficiently in hand to behave more or less as she *would* have behaved . . . a couple of hours ago.

"A nasty crash, that," he observed. "Did you see it?" The expression on his face was an unusual one, for Nick; he still looked tense . . . and a little strained.

Did she see it!

"Of course we all saw it. Mrs. Aylmer was terrified lest it might be Bevis." Her words sounded quite creditably ordinary now. She was so determined that they should be ordinary that she overdid it a little. But after all, that was only in keeping with her reputation as being entirely devoid of nerves or sentiment. "A hard little nut, that Clover Willoughby," so a rebuffed philanderer had once

described her. "No serious damage, I hope?" she added.

"No bones broken," Nick said. "But he was clean knocked out for a moment or two, and now he wants to ride on and try to pick them up at Staveleigh. It's simply idiotic." His vexed tone showed that his unwilling responsibility for the accident was weighing on him. "You stop him," he told her under his breath. "He's been badly shaken, and he's wrenched his shoulder and hurt his arm, but it's no use *my* talking to him. *You* can do it. Make him get off and drive back with you."

Clover stiffened a little. That intimation of the special influence which a woman can bring to bear on a man by reason of her sex had always been one with which she was frankly impatient. And of all moments this was the worst one to choose for asking her to bring it to bear upon Karslake.

"Oh, if he means to go on," she said quickly, "he certainly won't change his mind because of anything *I* may say."

And she honestly believed that it was true. This man over whom she had elected to make such a fool of herself hadn't given her any reason for doing so. He had only shown in a mild way that he found her society pleasant, that he preferred it, perhaps, to Lady Angela's or Ruth's or Mrs. Aylmer's . . . It was absurd that she should assume a right to influence him in any way.

Her eyes rested uncertainly on him where he sat a few yards away on his other hunter, a good-looking iron-grey. In the background, his second horseman waited patiently. The chestnut would give no more trouble today. His wet sides still heaved from that last mad gallop, his head drooped listlessly and a long bleeding scratch marked his steaming shoulder. His late rider also bore

many signs of his fall. His coat was stained and muddy, as were his white breeches and the boots which no longer shone. His hat, too, bore crumpled evidence to its adventure.

Clover heard him telling Mrs. Mordaunt that he had got off uncommon lightly, all things considered, and that the person he was sorriest for was Storrington, who was determined to blame himself for the accident.

"You'll go home now, though, surely?" Mrs. Mordaunt said.

He shook his head and took out his cigarette case; but even in making the movement a twinge of pain shot across his face.

"You're not fit to go on," she told him with friendly peremptoriness. "You'll take another toss, and what on earth shall we do if you're laid up for the show? Oh, don't be silly! Clover," she turned round to the girl, "there's more room in your car than ours,—do take this stupid man home."

"I'm afraid I can't kidnap him," Clover protested with forced gaiety, "even in the interest of the theatricals! And since I can't *do* anything, and nothing that anybody says seems to have any effect . . ."

Karslake had wheeled the grey round and brought him close up to her little car; he was looking down at her as she finished speaking. He must have noticed that she had volunteered no part in the argument until she was appealed to, whatever conclusion he chose to draw from it. The shadow of that twitch of pain seemed still to be distorting his dark face; or was some inward mental struggle disturbing him?

Her eyes smiled gallantly up into his, that dilated suddenly as he spoke with a curious note of recklessness in his voice.

"All right; give me my orders," he said. "I surrender—to *force majeure*."

But he might just as well have said "I surrender to *you*" and been done with it, thought Mrs. Mordaunt with inward amusement as she saw the rose flush steal into Clover's uplifted face.

He swung himself a little stiffly to the ground and got into the car beside her, submitting under laughing protest while Mrs. Mordaunt insisted on improvising a sling for his injured arm out of her scarf. His man took over the grey and started off homewards with both horses.

"Now you're being sensible," Storrington told him as he rode hurriedly away in the opposite direction, towards Staveleigh woods, and Mrs. Mordaunt climbed back into the Manor car, which proceeded to follow in his wake.

Clover put her engine into reverse, backed on to the grass and, turning, let out her little car on to its top speed. They passed the two hunters in a flash that evoked a light-hearted stampede from the grey. The chestnut for once was too crestfallen to put up any show at all. Karslake leant back, lit a cigarette, and asked mildly:

"Please, need we scorch?"

"Oh!" Her flush, which had nearly subsided, rose again in hot self-reproach. "Is it too fast for you? Are you feeling awfully rotten?"

"Not in the least, thank you. But at this rate we shall be back in about ten minutes, shan't we?"

"Well, I thought that the sooner you got home and had a hot bath and your shoulder attended to, the better," she answered; but she slowed down.

"And *I* was thinking," Karslake's voice was very soft —every pulse in her throbbed to the unspoken caress in it—"that this was absolutely the first time I'd ever driven with you."

At which she protested quickly that he had forgotten. He had driven herself and Aunty Letty in his car to the Hound Puppy Show.

"No, I haven't forgotten," he said briefly; and she would have been a fool not to draw the obvious inference. Driving with *her*—alone—and driving with her and Miss Cunliffe were, it seemed, two quite different things.

It was the first time he had ever said anything to her which held the intimately personal note. He had ridden up the field and into the road feeling rather shaken, a little bit off his guard. Then something in the silence with which she had greeted him had made itself felt; there had been a magnetic current in the atmosphere, which, when their eyes met, had seemed to pass swiftly from one to the other. The defences which had held these two apart—unconscious on her side, deliberate on his—began to crumble in that moment.

They spoke very little on the way back. Clover was feeling absurdly tongue-tied and Karslake made few attempts to break her silence. She guessed that his shoulder must be aching and that he was feeling stiff and bruised, but instinctively she knew that he was perfectly content, sitting there beside her, his arm touching hers, and that he had only spoken the truth when he had intimated that he wasn't in any hurry to get home.

They were held up a few moments at the lodge gates. Owen, who was growing old and a little deaf, didn't hear the horn. But he came hurrying out, just as Clover, who had been about to jump out herself, was restrained by her companion's warning that it would be no use. The gates were locked as well as shut.

She had heard a vague rumour of something of the kind, but his information struck an unexpected, jarring

note. It was by innovations of this kind, she thought, that Karslake upset the prejudices of his neighbours, giving hidebound conservatives like Uncle Bill an excuse for regarding him as a stranger within the gates and half an alien to boot, and for bestowing on him that detestable nickname of Dago.

It was on the tip of her tongue to make some comment, something that might elicit from him, without actual questioning his reason for it. But again her new self-consciousness held her silent; and Karslake volunteered no addition to his plain statement of fact. The gates were locked; that was all.

Owen unlocked them; and, no doubt, locked them again after the car had passed through. She didn't see him do it; but the knowledge that he had done so remained with her during the drive up to the house. It disturbed her—this irksome feeling of being locked in, as it were, with her host; and undoubtedly it had something to do with her regretful refusal to stay to lunch and let him send his own car to fetch Miss Cunliffe.

Karslake stood on the steps before the hall door for some moments after she had driven away, with the two great hounds, which had come out to meet him, standing on either side. He watched her car growing smaller in the distance down the long, straight drive.

His shoulder was aching like hell; the whole of him was one weary ache. He had been lucky to get off with no bones broken, no ribs stove in. . . .

Lucky?

The smile that curved his lips held a mocking irony; and the irony deepened and hardened. He knew himself and his own moods. It was a damn sight luckier that she had refused to stay; luckier . . . for *her*.

Juan Karslake's brooding eyes detached themselves slowly from the receding car and, narrowing, glanced

swiftly about him; the little domed roof of the temple summer-house held them for more than a moment.

Then he shrugged his shoulders and winced at the pain that followed. The expression on his face as he turned to mount the steps wasn't good to see.

A haunted devil. Yes; and a dangerous one.

CHAPTER VIII

NICHOLAS STORRINGTON rode into his stable-yard late that afternoon to find it pervaded by a distinctly troubled atmosphere. Martin, who came hurrying out to take his horse, was voluble and angry. In answer to his master's inquiries, he admitted reluctantly that Sparrowhawk wasn't damaged as far as he could see; but it appeared that Karslake's head groom had brought the chestnut home himself and—here Martin became bitterly emphatic —" 'E said a few things, Master Nick, about carelessness and the like, that I couldn't 'ardly blame 'im for, seein' as I 'ear Mr. Karslake 'e took an uncommon nasty toss, all along o' Albert changing that there bridle."

"Damn near broke his neck," Nick commented tersely. "I can't imagine what that fool Albert can have been thinking about."

" 'Adn't no right to think at all, sir," said Martin, still more bitterly. "Not in *my* stables. That ain't what 'e's 'ere for—*thinking!*" Martin's *amour-propre* was badly hurt. A slur had been cast on the efficiency of *his* stables. He muttered angrily to himself as he led Kestrel away. Storrington said nothing to him about the empty petrol tank; he may have thought that any extra cause of complaint might well be allowed to go by the board.

Mrs. Martin also was gloomy, but for a different reason. She had a soft heart, and she looked upon Albert, since she had nursed him, in some sort as her protégé. When she brought in the ham and poached eggs which supplemented Storrington's tea on hunting days, she informed him that Albert was "terrible upset. She wasn't saying

but that he'd done an uncommon senseless thing; but he'd meant it for the best, no doubt of it. And Martin'd been at the poor fellow something cruel. She couldn't deny but that it was a vexing thing to have happened; but then, no one couldn't blame Martin. . . ."

"Certainly not," Storrington said emphatically. "Nobody's blaming him, Mrs. Martin. I hope he quite understands that."

Mrs. Martin relaxed a little, but was still distressed about Albert, who, it seemed, had taken his "telling off" so much to heart that he was talking about throwing up his job and departing without his month's wages.

"Says as how he feels that you'll never trust him again after this, sir," Mrs. Martin said.

"Oh, nonsense!" Nick said easily. "The best of us are liable to make mistakes. Send him in to me after tea, and I'll hear what he's got to say for himself."

It turned out that Albert had very little to say for himself, and it was easy to see how even that little wouldn't have improved his case with his wrathful superior.

He had thought that it was Martin who had made the mistake in the first instance; Mr. Storrington would bear him out, seeing he was here at the time. When he had brought the chestnut back and changed the bridle, he had believed himself to be rectifying that mistake. For the rest Albert accepted his master's own strictures with a dispirited meekness.

"Martin was quite right, sir," he repeated doggedly. "I don't feel as if I'd ever be able to live down a thing like that, seeing what came of it."

"Don't be absurd, man," Storrington said. "Nothing came of it."

But Albert shook his head. With all due respects to Mr. Storrington, and thanking him very much for all his kindness, he would prefer to give notice.

Storrington's eyebrows were knit over his keen, meditative blue eyes, as he returned the man's impassive gaze.

He knew his old groom well enough to realise that when Martin had once started a grievance he didn't relinquish it lightly. Albert's ill-fated officiousness would rankle for some time. After all, the whole thing had been an experiment—this taking into one's employ of a man of whom one knew nothing. It had promised well—markedly well. It had turned out not so well. Your philanthropist must expect his disappointments. And as it happened, he knew that Albert's stupidity in the matter of the bridles wasn't Martin's only cause of complaint against him. There was another.

It seemed that Albert, for all his unsociable ways, had struck up a friendship with the daughter of one of the keepers whose cottage was at the other side of the park. A flighty little piece, according to Martin, always with an eye for the lads. Martin had found out that once or twice, when Albert was supposed to have gone to bed, he had slipped out and returned very late and unostentatiously. The old groom had a strong suspicion that these absences had indicated a sweethearting tryst with the young woman somewhere in the park. It seemed, of course, rather unlikely that the girl would have dared to choose the temple summer-house as a meeting place, but there it was; after hearing that someone had been seen there at night, Martin had thought that Mr. Nicholas ought to know. Mrs. Martin was inclined to look leniently upon these escapades—all love-affairs enlisted her sympathy; but where morals were concerned, Martin took leave to doubt "these 'ere furriners." Phœbe McKay might be getting herself into trouble if she didn't watch out; and McKay, a fiery-tempered man, would no doubt hold Martin responsible in some sort, seeing that Albert was his underling.

Nick, at the time, had pooh-poohed the whole affair. "Let 'em alone," he had said in his genial, easy-going fashion. "You've forgotten your own courting days, Martin. And if it's anybody's business, it's McKay's, not ours."

Now, however, for a moment he was silent, playing thoughtfully with a paper-knife on the writing-table before which he sat.

"Just as you please," he said at last. "You've done your work well so far, and I'm sorry that things have ended like this. You'll stay out the end of your month, I suppose? That will give me time to get another man in your place. By the way," he hesitated, then spoke with judicial care, weighing each word, "I understand that there's been some talk about you and McKay's daughter. They tell me you've been meeting her late at night, and not in her father's cottage. Well, take my advice and be careful. If you don't mean to marry the girl—and you're hardly in a position to marry at present—leave her alone."

"Yes, sir."

It was to be noticed that he hadn't affirmed or denied the soft impeachment, and Storrington went on slowly, choosing his words with a certain grim humour.

"Old McKay and his two lads are hot-tempered and muscular fellers, and if they find you playing fast and loose with the girl, they won't wait to talk it over. They'll start in straight away to lay you out. If you're aching to make a martyr of yourself in other directions besides chucking up your job, you're going the right way about it. You'd have as much chance against the McKays as an early Christian against a pack of Roman gladiators. And you may take it from me as a friendly warning that if it was a case of 'thumbs down,' I shouldn't interfere even if I could. Got that?"

He put down the paper knife and looked up to see that Albert, who had been standing near the door, twisting his cap in his hands, had made a sudden step forward and was staring at him with the most peculiar expression. Surprise, fear and bewilderment were mingled in it. He opened his mouth as though to speak, then checked himself with an almost audible gasp.

It would seem either that the idea of the McKays' belligerence had scared him stiff, or that Nick had inadvertently struck some note in his friendly warning that had shaken the man to the core.

"Yes, sir," he stammered. "I will remember." And accepting his employer's nod of dismissal, went out.

"Fairly put the wind up him," Storrington muttered to himself.

To Ruth Aylmer, ten days later, discussing the qualifications of a village protégé of hers as a possible successor to Albert, he remarked that if it hadn't been for Martin he would have tried to persuade the man to stay on.

"In many ways he was very satisfactory," he said; and added whimsically, "as you get older you give up any hope of ever being a free agent. In fact one might say, at least as far as a man is concerned, that when he verges on middle age he has the choice of being a slave either to his wife or his servants."

"Get married, then," said Ruth succinctly. "I can't think why you don't, Nickie. You'd make an ideal husband—always seeming so entirely devoted and always being so completely detached. That's what most women really want, you know, though they try to persuade themselves to the contrary. Hobson's choice, I suppose. It's the other thing that so many of them have to put up with, as far as I can judge from my friends' marriages."

"Is that what *you*'ll want in a husband when you even-

tually decide to leave off oiling the wheels of life for your mother and Bevis?" he asked her, smiling.

It had always seemed to him that to a man who wasn't hopelessly in love with another woman, Ruth Aylmer would make a delightful wife. She was so tolerant and so invigorating. Almost one ceased to yearn for the unattainable and forgot the injustice of life when one was with Ruth. The very fact of life itself—sane, healthy, well-occupied life—would seem somehow almost sufficient.

But Ruth was blithely unconscious of his thoughts. One had grown so accustomed to look on Nickie simply as everyone's dependable, cheery pal, with just that queer little harmless dash of malice in him that lent him piquancy—like the bitter-sweet flavour which prevents some safe, wholesome dish from being relegated to the *menu* of the commonplace.

"Well, I don't know that I've ever considered the matter from a personal point of view," she answered lightly. "You see, I'm conceited enough to think that the wheels at the Manor couldn't possibly go round without me."

"Bevis will marry some day, I suppose," Nick suggested.

"When he does, Mum will still want me," Ruth said cheerfully. "And, anyhow, there doesn't seem much likelihood of its happening just yet, while he persists in hanging round Clover. He hasn't the ghost of a chance with her, poor boy, and he won't see it. Nickie . . ." She paused doubtfully.

"Yes, my child?"

They were in the barn at the Manor, Nick putting the finishing touches to a piece of scenery, while Ruth, sitting on the edge of the dusty stage, was mending one of the curtains. The theatricals were to take place the day after next.

"I'm beginning to wonder," Ruth said slowly, "whether Danesthorpe Hall isn't going to have a mistress again after all these years?"

He squeezed out some more paint on to his palette before replying. Then:

"I doubt it," he said.

"Now, why?" She put down her work and leant forward, clasping her hands over her crossed knees. "Oh, of course, Clover isn't the sort of girl who wears her heart upon her sleeve——"

"Or rushes in where angels set the pace," he misquoted. She laughed unwillingly.

"Poor Angela! Yet I sometimes think it wouldn't make much difference whatever she did!"

"Perhaps not." He shrugged his shoulders. "After all, in these days your celestial sprinters are likely to get at least as far upon the road to what they want as the 'woman that fleeth when no man pursueth.' "

Ruth severely ignored his cynicism.

"It's a thousand pities about Angela," she said, "because she and Bevis would really suit one another admirably; and if Clover were only out of the way . . ."

"That's a friendly attitude," Nick remarked mildly.

"It *is,* perfectly friendly," she defended herself. "I *love* Clover, and I know her pretty well——"

"Yet you'd tranquilly see her married to a feller whom you hardly know at all, and who's decidedly unpopular in some quarters," he interrupted.

Ruth stuck to her guns.

"He's popular with nearly all the hunting crowd," she said, "and the Belfords like him, and Major Fairlie is always up at the Hall. The Skipper's prejudiced, and so's Mum. Mum feels that he's cut Bevis out. Who else disapproves of him? Mrs. Anson? Oh, she's a parson's

wife, poor dear; she can't believe that any man who's as good-looking as that can possibly be *good!* Also she's convinced that his Alsatians will decimate her husband's parishioners, though the wretched animals have never even been seen in the village yet! No one else dislikes him but Bevis, and one can't help realising what Bevis's opinion is worth in this case."

"What about Angela?" he suggested.

"Angela doesn't dislike him. She only pretends that he frightens her; and that's absurd." Ruth was eminently practical and unimaginative. "It's on a par with that ridiculous yarn that's been going round the golf club."

"What's that?" Storrington metaphorically pricked his ears.

She shook her head.

"No. I'm not going to spread gossip. It's just a yarn and its origin isn't any too reliable." She closed her firm mouth very decidedly.

"I didn't know that Karslake had taken to going up to the golf club," he said. "I don't go there much myself. I haven't time. I know he hasn't been out hunting lately. Said his shoulder was still painful."

"It hasn't interfered with his swing at golf," Ruth said shrewdly. "I don't believe there was ever much the matter with his shoulder. He never called in Doctor Richards to see it; and though he certainly wasn't doing much more than walk round with Clover and caddie for her, whenever I saw them last week, he was playing all right yesterday."

Storrington made no comment on this. For some moments he concentrated intently on his work. His face was expressionless—too expressionless. It takes a very strong emotion to wipe out all expression on the face of a man

who has himself under uncommonly good control. Presently he volunteered the statement that he still didn't think there was anything in it.

"I don't see what should make you say that," she said in a slightly dissatisfied voice.

"I'll tell you if you like." He seemed to come to a sudden resolution. "I've got practically Karslake's own word for it, and he didn't sound as though he were talking through his hat. He's told me plainly that he has no intention of ever marrying. I gather there's some reason against it—he didn't say what; but he seemed to be particularly anxious that I should realise it. He may be already married, for all any of us know to the contrary."

"So he may!" Ruth stared at him in a dismay that was almost comical. "Oh! but if he is, it's an awful shame that he should come here posing as a bachelor. . . ."

"And 'giving rise to false hopes,' as Mrs. Anson would certainly put it," Storrington added with mock gravity.

"No, but seriously, Nick!"

"Seriously," he retorted, "I can't see that he's done much, so far, to give rise to any hopes at all on the part of the most optimistic young female."

Ruth heaved a little sigh, and took up her work again.

"No, I suppose not," she agreed reluctantly.

After all, a man might join the ranks of Clover's admirers without being committed to the same serious intentions which had characterised most of his fellow-victims. And playing golf with a girl wasn't a compromising occupation in itself, though it could be made one. The question, and it was a question which could only be answered by the parties concerned, was—what had Clover Willoughby and Juan Karslake made of those long rounds of the picturesque little country links? Of, say

that romantic, secluded spinney that bordered the eighth green? And the picturesque sandpit close to the tenth? Of the many assistances, in fact, towards playing a game whose rules were understood by every nation long before the first Scotchman invented golf?

Ruth pondered the question in silence, drawing her long needle in and out of the thick material. It might have interested her to know that Juan Karslake, strolling across the hall terrace at that moment, with his hands in his pockets and his smooth black head bare to the pale winter sunlight, was giving the same matter an even more intent consideration.

Some of those barriers which he had chosen to erect between himself and his fellow men and women had given way pretty rapidly once they had started to crumble on the day of his accident. What was it going to mean to him when the breach in the wall which he dimly foresaw should materialise and let Clover Willoughby through—this girl who had stirred his pulses as no woman had done for many a long year? She was so utterly unlike all the other women he had ever met, in her gay candour, her simplicity of outlook, and her fresh charm whose bloom had never been rubbed off.

The hard lines about his mouth which were barely perceptible at most times, deepened. If it did happen, it would happen with a crash, and he knew it. Deliberately he had shut his eyes during the last ten days to the possibility of that crash.

But it had cost him sleepless nights. Nights when, restless and wakeful, he had left his room and wandered noiselessly about the big, silent house, a haunted shadow among the shadows, hating himself for a past which nothing could blot out and whose lurid shadows were over him still.

Yet in so much had he emerged from it, that where once he would scarcely have hesitated to drag her into the sinister gloom with him, now as he paced sombrely through the gardens with one of the huge Alsatians following close at his heels, he cursed himself for even dallying with the thought.

In one of the turfed walks, he passed a gardener in conversation with a short, sallow-faced man whom he recognised as being the stable helper at the Dower House. The man was carrying a basketful of bulbs, making it clear to Karslake that the usual exchange and barter was taking place between his cousin's factotum and his own gardeners.

They broke off their conversation and touched their hats respectfully as he nodded a brief good morning. Castor, whose hackles had risen at first sight of someone more or less unfamiliar to him, quieted down under his master's restraining hand and voice, and as they drew nearer, clearly recognised his error. This strange man was one of those who held the *entrée*. Castor had met him before in the stable yard. He wagged his tail slowly, in deprecation of what had nearly been an error of judgment, and padded on after his master.

The fallacy that a dog is a discriminating judge of character has, one fancies, been exploded long ago; there is too much evidence to the contrary. Man's best friend is a mixture of many misplaced confidences and a few unjustifiable aversions; and the most unmitigated blackguard is inevitably a god to some faithful mongrel who can claim far more elements of the divine in his own pathetic little carcase.

Castor accepted Albert without further question as a reputable character; no super-instinct whispered a protest against this dictum. One might add—whatever the inference—that in less than a month he had attached

himself to Karslake with an absolutely slavish devotion.

Certainly Castor was not to blame in that, not having eyes at the back of his head, he missed the malevolent glance which followed his master as he walked on up the path.

CHAPTER IX

Eight o'clock on the night of the amateur theatricals. Nearly every house of any importance in the neighbourhood was well represented among the audience that filled the Manor Barn. It was a decidedly smart audience, as far as the so-called stalls were concerned; all the friends of the performers were going on after the show to supper and dance at Danesthorpe Hall.

Storrington, who had been shepherding them into their places, slipped into his own in the front row; and Bevis Aylmer, who had been firmly roped in by his sister to take the money that was paid in at the door, shoved his wooden table against the wall and sat on it. It was level with the sixth row of front seats, and gave almost as good a view of the stage.

The lights in the auditorium had been lowered; there was a last final rustling of programmes by late-comers, who had been too busy greeting their neighbours to read them. The amateur orchestra drew its bow in a final, triumphant scrape across its 'cello and two violins, and lifted energetic hands from the piano with a sigh of relief.

The chief piece of the evening was preceded by a curtain-raiser, a clever trifle written for two people, in which Lady Angela took the part of a little typist passing herself off on her annual holiday as a well-known heiress. Almost immorally alluring she looked in a dressing gown and boudoir cap; while the *rôle* of the burglar against whom she triumphantly matched her wits was taken by Karslake—slouching, furtive, unshaven. It was an uncommonly good bit of acting on both sides, and ended on

an unexpectedly sentimental note which fairly brought down the back of the house, filled up to standing room with the Danesthorpe villagers.

Clover, wearing her stage kit under a concealing cloak, slipped in among the audience after the curtain had gone up and made her way to the table on which Bevis was sitting.

"Angela's as nervous as a cat," she whispered, as she took her place beside him.

"She needn't be," he returned in the same tone. "She can act all right, and she looks damn pretty in that kit."

Clover nodded. If he hoped to pique her by enthusiastic praise of Lady Angela, he failed.

"She does—*awfully* pretty."

But her eyes rested with only mild interest upon Angela, alone at that moment upon the stage. It wasn't Angela whom she had come out here to see; and she settled herself more comfortably into position as she eagerly watched the sham window through which the burglar would climb on to the stage.

"Got enough room?" Bevis asked her solicitously.

"Plenty, thank you."

"This whitewash will come off on your cloak," he warned her. "You'd better lean against my arm."

She felt his arm slip behind her, and never dreamt of protesting. Why should she? In spite of his tiresome excursions into the sentimental he was, after all, only Bevis, her old playfellow from nursery days upwards. One didn't stand on ceremony with Bevis. So she leant back against his arm without the smallest embarrassment, and the luckless young man got what satisfaction he might out of the contact.

Later, in the succeeding play, he got even less satisfaction out of seeing her with Karslake's arm round her; but now an entirely different Karslake to the shuffling

wretch of the curtain-raiser—a very debonair individual this, suave, immaculate in clothes and manner.

About the middle of the first act he made his appearance—that effective entry which Ruth had been so anxious that the scenery should not spoil. As he stood for a moment in the archway, hat in hand, a half-smile on his lips, Storrington, down in the stalls, heard an involuntary muttered exclamation from his neighbour. He was a distinguished-looking man with a short, pointed grey beard, and an eyeglass attached to a narrow black ribbon. He belonged to the party from Chorton Ferrars, and Lady Belford had hurriedly introduced him on arrival as Sir Charles Haile. Storrington had guessed him to be something in the diplomatic line; the Belfords' friends often were.

"By George! I know that fellow! Who is he?" he asked in a lower voice. "Karslake, d'you say? Good God! So it is, of course. Juan Karslake!" He repeated the name with long drawn-out astonishment.

"Do you know him?" Storrington asked quickly. The other threw him a keen, inquiring glance.

"After a fashion," he said with some reserve; and then turned his attention once more to the stage, where it remained absorbed. It wasn't till the first act was over that Storrington's curiosity received any satisfaction; and even then it was only moderate.

"Well, well!" Sir Charles said meditatively. "It's the oddest thing to come across that fellow again after all this time . . . ! How long is it? Must be eight years, by George! What's he doing in this part of the world?"

Storrington told him briefly, and added:

"Lady Belford is bringing you all on to dance at Danesthorpe Hall to-night, I believe, so you'll be able to renew your acquaintance."

"H'm." Sir Charles's comment was even more thoughtful.

"I doubt if he'd remember me, or my name," he said. "I only met him once with a crowd of other people. That was just before he . . . disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Storrington raised his eyebrows.

"Yes; disappeared," repeated Sir Charles; he seemed for the moment lost in retrospect, almost forgetful of his hearer. "In Madrid it was, eight years ago. In those days," he added, "he was getting through his money in a pretty hectic fashion. Bit of luck for him to have dropped into some more like this."

"He's fairly lavish with his money now," Storrington remarked, "but I shouldn't call him hectic. I happen to be his cousin, and his agent into the bargain, so I ought to know." Beneath his placid exterior every nerve was tingling to hear more.

"H'm!" said Sir Charles again. He surveyed his companion thoughtfully. "Your cousin, eh? Has he ever spoken to you about his life in Spain?" he asked.

Storrington shook his head.

"I know rather less about him than about my most casual acquaintances. I'd never seen or heard of him till he came here."

"Ah." Apparently what Sir Charles saw in the other's face gave him confidence. "Well, I wonder whether you'd mind not mentioning either to him or to anyone else that he and I have met before? Odd request to make, I know; but it was rather an odd affair, that disappearance of his. Some of his friends even went to the police about it, but apparently the police were either inefficient or uncommunicative. And"—the smile that touched his thin lips beneath his grey moustache was a faintly sardonic one, "when a man disappears as thoroughly as all that, he doesn't do it because he wants to be found again. So

there it is. If he chooses to recognise me, it's his own look out. He may not; I hadn't grown a beard in those days."

Again that odd introspective smile intrigued and puzzled Storrington. But he couldn't very well do less than assent to the other's request, maddening though it was, that having said so much he would say no more. Particularly since it was obvious that there must be a good deal more to be said.

And meanwhile as the play went on, Karslake's acting held his audience spellbound. To Bevis, that acting came in the light of a sheer revelation of things that so far, he told himself, he had only suspected.

Acting? The man had been acting ever since he came to Danesthorpe Hall. Now, under cover of make-up and footlights, he was dropping the mask, revelling in the opportunity to be himself. To Bevis, watching him, fascinated, he brought a breath from another world across the footlights—a vague, sinister world from which one emerged battered, reckless and indelibly stamped with evil.

In this second *rôle* of his, even his marked gracefulness became—as seen across the footlights—actually an evil thing in itself, the stealthy, prowling ease of a beast of prey.

This, then, was the *real* Karslake at last, the man whom most of his new neighbours—fools! so Aylmer apostrophised them with a bitter sense of superiority—accepted at his face value. He felt his very soul grow hot within him as he watched Karslake's love-scene with Clover. It wasn't a "strong" scene—there was rather, perforce, a certain restraint about it, since it represented the skilful love-making of a Lothario wooing an ingénue; and as it happened Aylmer had seen the incident rehearsed. But Karslake, like many good actors, was inclined to

underact a little at rehearsals; to-night he was putting far more into it; while some of his by-play was entirely new, both to Clover and to the jealous onlooker. The result was that, whereas at those rehearsals Clover herself had played her own part painstakingly and prettily but with entire lack of inspiration, to-night she was fairly shaken into giving her interpretation exactly the right note of fluttered self-consciousness.

Only it wasn't, correctly speaking, an interpretation at all. She was so genuinely confused and thrilled that she nearly forgot her lines. The stage embrace that was so much more nearly a real kiss than it had ever been before—the hand-clasp that lingered over hers, the caress in eyes and voice . . .

Could it really be all acting? Clover, who had accepted the support of Bevis' arm without a tremor, flushed under her make-up and caught her breath. Her eyes sank under his, not only because her part required this manifestation of bashfulness, but because she simply couldn't meet that other pair which were telling her—or so it seemed—things that they had never told her before—delicious, thrilling things. . . .

Oh, undoubtedly Clover Willoughby won a reputation for herself as an actress that night which she didn't at all deserve. But Aylmer had marked the difference in both their acting, and he at least gave no credit where it wasn't due. His scowl grew blacker every moment, as he savagely damned under his breath both Karslake himself and the opportunities which these blasted theatricals had afforded him. Certainly he was making the most of them.

Aylmer sat and gloomed through the rest of the play as only a hotly jealous man can gloom. It held no interest for him, excepting in so far as his bitterness against his rival increased with the rounds of applause which

greeted the end of each act. All the performers shared that applause with Karslake, and one or two deserved their share. But even Lady Angela's really clever acting made no appeal to Bevis in his present mood. For him the figure of Karslake entirely dominated the stage; and by the time the curtain had gone down to rise no more, he had worked himself into a state of mind in which the fiery Aylmer temper was as ready-laid fuel only waiting for a spark to fire it.

Scarcely a doubt but that it would have broken out at some time during the evening, if it hadn't been for the fact that Karslake, playing host at the first entertainment of any size which he had given at Danesthorpe Hall, was obliged to divide his attentions so thoroughly that he was only able to dance twice with Clover.

Bevis himself, however, didn't gain much advantage from this. For since Clover couldn't dance for the rest of the evening with the man whose stage love-making had made her feel as no man had ever made her feel before, she divided out her own programme as impartially as he was doing.

Flushed and starry-eyed, she passed lightly and gaily from one partner to another, and there were some onlookers who said in the days to come that she must surely have been "fey" that night. There was such a radiance about her. She was like an exquisite summer flower opened to full bloom in the shadow of an impending thunderstorm.

Threatening indications of that thunderstorm were not lacking; and more than one observer marked them with varying emotions. Mrs. Aylmer, her silver brocade keeping Lady Belford's well worn black velvet and gorgeous diamonds company on the ottoman at one end of the picture gallery where they danced, noted her son's frequent disappearances into the adjoining ante-room and wished

nervously that their host had been less lavish in his hospitality. It would have been quite enough, she told herself, for a semi-informal affair like this, that lemonade and ices should supplement the champagne supper that had intervened between the acting and the dance. There was no necessity for that elaborate ante-room buffet, where more champagne, whisky and soda and iced cups flanked the sandwiches and trifles in aspic and the elaborate sweets.

The gloomy mood in which the play had left Bevis hadn't escaped her. It had lifted a little at supper, when Clover had sat next him; but it had lowered again after Clover's first dance with her host. He had begun to console himself at the buffet.

He wasn't a drinking man any more than his father had been—not, that is to say, as "drinking" is understood by a gay, hard-riding, sporting neighbourhood which reserves its censure for nothing under a "soaker." But the Aylmers had a tendency towards that weakness. She had known him, once or twice, when disturbed or annoyed, to indulge in decidedly more than was good for him; and the result, with a temperament as fiery as was his, was to be dreaded.

Like a good many spoilt and healthy young animals, Aylmer rebelled against pain or trouble with the bewildered anger of a hurt puppy which is liable to fly to any consolation or to break out in futile destructiveness. At the present moment he was imbued with some of the hazardous qualities of a walking powder magazine.

His mother was thankful, presently, to see that Angela Vyse had taken him in tow and disappeared with him from the ballroom.

The picture gallery was on the first floor, and there was a wide-roofed and colonnaded balcony outside its windows. It was a fine still night, with a bright moon, and

the balcony had been partly curtained in for the occasion—with here an open space letting in the air and moonlight upon the heated dancers, and there a stretch of drapery affording shelter and semi-darkness. Rugs had been laid down, low chairs set apart, and tall palms imported from the conservatory. Lady Angela moved swiftly across to an open space between the curtains and leant her elbows on the top of the stone balustrade. The cold night air evoked a luxurious little shiver from her, as she drew her embroidered Spanish shawl closer around her shoulders.

"Too cold for you? Shall we go back?" her partner asked with sudden solicitousness. She looked such a little scrap of a thing, her smooth blonde head well below the level of his shoulder, her small pale face childish in the cold glimmer that dimmed its artificiality.

"No; I don't want to dance any more for the moment. You can get me some lemonade, and bring some for yourself."

He turned to carry out the request and she caught him by the arm.

"*Lemonade,* please," she repeated emphatically. "Nothing stronger . . . for either of us."

Her meaning was unmistakable. Bevis' attempt to laugh off its significance ended in a rather truculent bluster which she calmly disregarded. Her long, green eyes held his steadily, and there was a smile on her lips that took the sting from her words. Lady Angela was a fairly broad-minded young woman where a man's failings were concerned. The men of her own family—hard-riding, hard-drinking, hard-swearing—had made ample demands upon her toleration.

"Another little drink or two and you'll be blind to the world," she remarked with terse inelegance. "And what's more you'll have the dickens of a head to-morrow . . .

opening and shutting . . . *just* like that!" She released him to make a graphic little illustration with both slim hands laid palm to palm, separating and closing. "And didn't I hear Clover say that you were playing golf with her to-morrow afternoon?"

She had struck the right chord. Bevis had not as yet drunk enough to make him incapable of resisting more; and Clover's promise to play golf with him, made at supper—and, if he had only known it, out of the fullness of her new happiness—was partly responsible for the fact that he hadn't. His golf handicap was "plus two." Angela's reminder brought home to him the fact that he certainly wouldn't play up to it with a "day-after-the-night-before" head.

He knew himself to be a far better player than Karslake; and he'd be an infernal mug if he were to let himself down in Clover's eyes with regard to one of the few things in which he could beat his rival. . . .

His expression now was somewhat sheepish, and Angela laughed.

"You'd forgotten it!" she challenged him with a little thrill of exultation, and he didn't contradict her; didn't tell her that if he had, it was due to the infuriating sight of Clover Willoughby drifting down the room in Karslake's arms, a sight that had entirely put out of his head the prospective and pleasanter vision of Clover swinging a golf club.

He fetched the lemonade, and when he returned Storrington had joined her with the Belford's pretty flapper daughter. A jolly, giggling little thing, the Honble. Elizabeth, with a mop of flame-coloured hair and a determinedly retroussé nose. She wasn't supposed to be out yet, being not quite seventeen; but Nick, who was tremendously popular with all the local fledglings, had persuaded her mother to let her appear at this dance.

"After all," Lady Belford had admitted weakly, "girls don't really 'come out' under the same hard and fast rules that they used to, now that they haven't any hair to put up or any skirts worth mentioning to let down . . . they just *dribble* out." Accordingly Elizabeth had "dribbled out," and was making a very joyous thing of the performance.

"I want to see Mr. Karslake's Alsatians," she was saying as Bevis came up. "Is it true that he has a couple that are bigger than our Grey Friar? Where are they?"

"Want to be eaten, infant?" Nick asked her lazily; "cut off in your carroty prime? Hi!" as she made a vigorous onslaught upon him, "paws off, young woman! don't knock me off the balcony. Would you throw an old pal to the wolves?"

"What? are they down there?" she asked eagerly, relinquishing her attack and peering over.

"No; he's pulling your leg," Lady Angela said. "Mr. Karslake told me that they're chained up to-night, for fear they should fall foul of some strange chauffeur."

Bevis interposed.

"Well, I saw one of em when I was out here a few minutes ago, slinking about in the bushes down there."

"Eh?" Storrington laid a hand of mock concern on the younger man's shoulder. His eyebrows went up at least half an inch. His curious little twisted smile emphasised the incredulity in his twinkling blue eyes as he shook his head sadly.

"What, already, my lad?" he asked. "What colour was the brute—pink?"

"Oh, get out!" said Bevis, and drew his partner's attention to the lemonade with a certain ostentation.

But Elizabeth continued to peer over into the thick shrubs bordering the gravel-sweep that circled the lawn

in front of the house, every leaf etched in black and silver in the clear moonlight.

"There's something so deliciously creepy," she said, "about the idea of those big prowling creatures out there in the silence. Feels as if we were away in Siberia or the wilds of Canada——"

"Or Hollywood, U.S.A.," finished her partner scoffingly. "Come along in and dance, you film fan!"

He took her firmly by the arm and removed her. Otherwise she was obviously prepared to stay where she was till the band struck up again. A few more years would have to roll over her Titian locks before the serene self-centredness of youth would allow her to realise that she could ever be *de trop*. Storrington himself had never been guilty, even in his fledgling days, of that kind of clumsiness. Unless, as happened occasionally, a deliberately impish spirit took possession of him, his tact was unfailing.

Later in the evening, he happened to be again upon the balcony, alone this time, smoking a cigarette, when Clover and her host came out together. Karslake was wearing the hunt evening coat which most of the younger men had adopted this evening. It suited his dark good looks amazingly well.

The band had just started again, and the balcony was deserted excepting for that solitary, rather lonely figure of the man who had once looked forward to playing the host here in his own person.

They didn't see him as he sat there on the balustrade motionless, leaning against a pillar and partly hidden from them by the fronds of a tall palm; but he recognised their voices and identified them against the background of lighted window as they came out and passed away into the discreet shadows at the further end of the balcony. They sat down there in two secluded chairs.

There seemed no need for him to move away, since they weren't quite near enough for him to hear what they were saying, and in any case the music drifting out from the ballroom would have drowned their words. They talked in low voices, but even through the music he could hear that there were long pauses—those significant pauses which only mean one of two things where a man and a woman are concerned: either that they have nothing to say to one another or . . . too much.

Storrington's cigarette went out unheeded as he sat there staring out into the vast dim spaces, motionless.

The joyous crashing of the music inside set his nerves on edge. Yet he sat on, riveted as it were to the spot, the murmur of those two voices emerging maddeningly from the welter of sound. A tide of thoughts, most of them bitter, seethed in his mind, and a flood of conjectures swept it bare of any definite facts to cling to. What was it that Sir Charles Haile knew about their host that he wouldn't reveal? Was it by any chance connected with that same thing which had made Karslake himself say that he would never marry? Nick had hoped that the meeting of the two might have given him a clue to some of the many things that he wanted to know about his cousin; but it had given him none. They had met as strangers. Sir Charles had evidently been right in saying that his host would probably fail to remember him.

Storrington sat on, thinking. And down below, in the shrubs where Bevis Aylmer had declared that he had seen one of his host's wolfhounds, something moved.

It could never have been mistaken for a dog excepting on the most cursory inspection. When a dog noses about among thick shrubs, the commotion is much more apparent.

Here there was only an occasional tremor of the leaves,

still some distance from the house. But whatever lurked there was approaching nearer and at the same time in a slanting direction, sideways and upwards, along the slope that rose abruptly towards the terraces and upper lawns. A trail of quivering leaves and of branches that waved ever so lightly marked its approach.

Presently it reached a spot where the shrubs grew thinly and then for some time the commotion ceased altogether; it was as though the hidden cause of it hesitated on the verge of the more open passage. Then once more the leaves began to shake; the commotion spread; and if anyone had been looking closely they might have made out the dim outline of a man's shape, crawling and stooping under the sparser foliage. Presently, a face, clearly visible against its dark background, emerged, uplifted towards the balcony. The moonlight poured down on it—that sinister, hungry-eyed face. If Storrington hadn't been sunk in such a deep reverie one would have said that it was almost impossible that he shouldn't have seen it. Certainly the lurking watcher could see him; could, if he happened to know him, have recognised him unmistakably.

Perhaps the man realised this. For as Storrington, his brooding eyes still gazing out and downwards, made a sudden movement, he sank down among the leaves, motionless.

At the further end of the balcony, Clover had just broken an extra long pause.

"You can't realise, of course," she said, "how strange it all seems to be dancing and frivolling here. I expect the last kind of dance that was ever performed in Danesthorpe Hall was a polka or a quadrille. I don't suppose anyone has sat on this balcony for thirty years at least."

He laughed.

"The old place must feel that its dignity has been

thoroughly shaken and upset," he said; "if you can apply such an attractive word as dignity to the solid ugliness of it. Compared with houses I have known—in South America, for instance . . . Ah, they knew how to build houses, those old Spaniards! There was a house I once stayed in—" he paused, his memory reaching back to one of those fleeting rests of his—oasis in a wandering existence—"you would have loved it, I think," he finished slowly.

"Tell me about it," she said. There was a new and curious thrill to-night about listening to one of his rare moments of expansiveness on anything connected with his past. "It was old, I suppose?"

"Centuries old," he said, "and built in the old Spanish style. Its huge front door had an exquisite old bronze knocker, and was marvellously carved. And its beautiful windows had grilles of balustraded wood, dark and unpolished and old as the house itself. There were three patios, wide places of dazzling sun and deep cool shadow and always the tinkle of running water; places where the bougainvilleas were massed in glowing sheets of crimson and purple and the wisteria showered down the white walls, and humming-birds flashed across the sunlit spaces and glittered like tiny live jewels against the silver spray of the fountains . . ."

She drew a long breath.

"It sounds like a fairy dream," she said.

"It seems like a dream when I think of it *here*." He made a slight, expressive gesture. "But perhaps *you* don't think this place so cold, so ugly?" He seemed to wait for her answer with something more than ordinary curiosity.

"Ugly?" she repeated musingly. "No, I don't really think I do. I've grown up near it, you see, though one wasn't often invited inside it, because old Mr. Karslake very rarely entertained. I can tell you this, though, that

one would hardly know it, now-a-days. To-night it's Danesthorpe Hall more than your dream-house that doesn't seem quite real to me—with all the flowers and the light and the music; rather more like something in a mirage that might disappear any moment and leave silence and darkness and big, cold empty rooms." She stopped abruptly with a little laugh at herself. "But then even *you* don't seem quite real to-night," she confessed. "How am I to be quite sure which is the *real* you—the wicked adventurer who was my lover in the play, or—Juan Karslake who is my host now?"

He didn't respond to the whimsical little smile with which she put the question. Instead he countered with another.

"Do you find, then, so much difference between the two?" he asked swiftly on an impulse, as it were; a startling undertone of bitterness edged his voice. He bent forward as he spoke, and his curious eyes darkened and glowed as they met hers; they seemed to burn at her out of the dusk, compelling an answer even while their magnetic dominance deprived her of the power to voice it.

Nearer still he bent. Then abruptly, with a muttered exclamation, he moved back and away from her. The sound of his chair scraping the floor jarred roughly, breaking the spell.

"Quite right," he said almost harshly, as though commenting on her tardiness in replying. "Don't answer that. Why should you? To ask it was an impertinence."

He got up and stood looking sombrely down at her while she returned his glance blankly, a little dazed by his sudden change of manner.

Then a man emerged from the shadows on the opposite side of the balcony and moved into the light that streamed through the window.

"Anyone give me a light?" he asked pleasantly.

Karslake swung round.

"Hullo, Storrington," he said. "Not dancing?" He came forward to meet the other, pulling out his matchbox and striking a match, which he shaded with his hand as Storrington lit his cigarette at the flame.

Both men, standing by the balustrade in that uncurtained space where Lady Angela had leant a little while ago, were outlined clearly against the light behind them, while the moonlight that poured upon their faces was almost as bright as day.

Outside, in the shrubberies, on the higher ground that gave anyone standing there a clear line of vision across the balustrade, something on which the moonlight gleamed was raised and levelled steadily.

"Inside there," Storrington said with a jerk of his head as he drew back, "they're doing one of those mad new dances; and as I never had convulsions as an infant and haven't yet arrived at the joyous twitches of senility, I felt I wasn't qualified to perform before an audience. So I handed Elizabeth over to Loftus, who has the courage of extreme youth, and came out here to meditate on the disadvantages of prosaic middle age."

He was talking rather at random. The strain of the last few moments, when he had sat and listened to those two low voices, had strung him pretty taut.

Clover, who rose now and joined them, noticed the unusual element in his manner, but she was far from guessing the cause. All she realised was that something or other had happened to upset Nick and that this exaggerated flippancy was his method of showing it. She felt in sympathy with him, having herself just been oddly disappointed and taken aback.

"We gave it up too," she said lightly. "But I'd love to see you both try it. Do, please! . . . I'll be your only audience; not even the stars shall mock at you."

She slipped swiftly between the two men and the balustrade, seated herself on it with a lithe spring, and stretching out her slim bare arms with a mock dramatic gesture, drew the curtains on each side close together above her head.

Down below, the something that had gleamed, wavered now in uncertain fashion, as the unexpected figure in a shimmering blue frock suddenly intervened between the hidden watcher and his prey, drawing the curtains and shutting from sight every thing but her own filmy draperies. Up on the balcony Nick uttered a sharp exclamation, and catching hold of the girl, swept her almost roughly off her high perch.

"Good God! you little idiot!" he said hastily. "Don't ever do that again! If those curtains had given away, you might have gone over backwards and broken your neck!"

"Oh, don't be absurd, Nickie!"

Clover shook off his grip impatiently. She was a little ruffled. She hated being fussed over; and particularly she hated the ingrained masculine idea that, being merely a "fool of a woman," she must needs get herself into perilous situations and have to be helped out of them.

She prided herself on her physical balance being as reliable as her mental one, and she didn't consider that she'd been in any danger whatever in the past moment. Then her annoyance died away as she remembered that Nick was clearly on edge . . . nervy . . . a little unbalanced himself. His voice had sounded quite thick and breathless.

"Ridiculous person!" she said in amused and softer tones. "Do you really think I'd do a stupid thing like that, with Castor and Pollux prowling about down there too? Listen . . . do you hear them?"

A deep baying note had floated to them from the near

distance—another echoed it, closer . . . coming from the rear of the house.

"They're being let out for a run," Karslake said.

Something else was on the run too, at the first sound of them. The commotion in the bushes started again, but this time with far less caution. With frantic haste that burrower among the leaves tunnelled his retreating path towards a side gate that led through the wall between the lawn and the park.

Pollice verso?

Maybe. Certainly the arena would seem to have been set for the final grim scene. But the Fates who sit aloft in the amphitheatre of life had reversed the ruthless order at the last moment.

CHAPTER X

THE next day the thunderstorm, metaphorically speaking, broke. Or rather the first distinct mutterings of it were heard.

They were heard by several people, most of whom hadn't the least idea that they were assisting at the forerunner of a climax that was to shake Danesthorpe and the neighbourhood for miles around to its very foundations.

It was a little thing that led up to it, but it made Bevis late for his appointment with Clover at the Golf Club. The losing of half-an-hour by his watch in the unexplainable way that watches sometimes have. Glancing at his wrist from time to time, as he held a consultation with the old shepherd who was in charge of the early lambing experiments, he had imagined himself to have plenty of time, and he could hardly believe when he arrived at the Clubhouse at three o'clock that he was actually half-an-hour late.

Meanwhile Clover, to whom it was a new thing to be kept waiting, had given him up. She and Miss Cunliffe had lunched at the Club, after which the older woman had motored home and had arranged to fetch her after tea, as Bevis had said that his mother would be wanting their car this afternoon.

It wasn't a hunting day, and thus left in the lurch Clover could immediately have had a choice of eager opponents. That choice however, so Captain Lindham thought disgustedly, as he watched her drive off from the first tee with Juan Karslake, was a foregone conclusion.

Major Fairlie came into the lounge at that moment and found his old friend glaring out of the window over the top of his paper, with glum disapproval.

"I've got a couple of letters to write," Fairlie announced, "and then we might as well walk out to the tenth and play in, what?"

"Nine holes will do me well enough," Lindham agreed. "Particularly after a lateish night of it."

"Ah—congratulations on last night's show," Fairlie said. "Thundering good it was. I suppose you went on to the dance afterwards? Karslake tried to rope me in,—me dancing! Good Lor!"

"I couldn't very well get out of it," the other said, "but I left moderately early. The thing was done uncommon well," he added with reluctant honesty. "But *too* well. Rather overdone, to my thinking. Lashings of drink and food and a first-class band. Clover tells me they were keeping it up till all hours." He relapsed again into his paper.

"And they seem to be continuing it in our next," remarked Fairlie with dry benevolence. He was standing by the window, his hands in his pockets, his keen noncommittal gaze following the two who had just moved off the first tee.

Lindham emerged from his newspaper again with a tremendous crackling and an energetic, explosive movement which made his chair creak under his heavy weight.

"That's how it strikes you, does it?" he growled wrathfully. "Now how many times lately has Clover played with that feller?"

Fairlie, who was to be found most days at the Golf Club at some time or other, made a mental calculation.

"Pretty often," he said at last. "Beginning to hurry up the pace a bit—what?"

"A damn sight too much so," the other commented with emphasis.

Duncan Fairlie puffed for a few moments at his short black pipe before making any further comment. Then,

"Modern methods," he said at last in his brief, jerky way. "Short drinks, short hair, and short courtships."

The Skipper's frown deepened.

"I'll thank you, Duncan," he said with dignity, "to keep that caustic tongue of yours off my ward. She's not one of your 'cocktails and kisses' kind. She's in a class by herself—old Tom Willoughby's girl *would* be."

"Oh, I was only speaking metaphorically."

Fairlie's casual explanation was all that his old friend needed in the way of apology. Mollified at once, he went on grumbling.

"Level-headed, decently-mannered and no nonsense about her—that's Clover," he said. "Then why, I put it to you"—he brought down one square fist on the horny palm of the other—"when she can have all the young fellers she's grown up with, buzzing round her for the lifting of a finger, does she pick up with a man whom nobody knows a thing about?"

"Good-looking feller," said the other succinctly. "That always gets the women."

"Good-looking be damned," snorted the old sailor; "Dago—that's what he is. Ain't young Bevis good-looking, I'd like to know?"

Fairlie puffed in silence.

"What's the matter with *him?* or with any of the rest of 'em?"

Having put what he considered to be two unanswerable questions, he retired once more in a gloomy triumph behind his paper.

Twenty minutes later, when Fairlie had departed into the writing-room, he emerged again from what had be-

come an after lunch snooze, to answer the second of those two questions for himself. Bevis Aylmer strode into the room scowling; and there was no doubt whatever as to what was the matter with him. He had been done out of his game of golf with Clover and he was thoroughly bad-tempered. The more so because, as Lindham promptly pointed out to him, if the fault wasn't his, it wasn't Clover's either. Nobody could very well be blamed; and Lindham, however he might criticize his late ward, would permit no criticisms of her from anybody else.

"Send your watch to be seen to, my boy," he said, "and play a round with someone else. There were several fellers hanging about just now."

"Yes, Karslake among 'em," said Bevis sardonically. "He *would* be. It's no good talking, Skipper! Clover might just as well have waited a bit longer. Damned inconsiderate of her, I call it. She knows perfectly well that I shouldn't have been late if I could possibly help it."

The older man stiffened.

"I don't know that you've much right to assume that, my lad," he said with some meaning. "You were putting away the whisky pretty freely when I left last night. If you finished the evening as you began it, I think anybody with whom you'd made any engagement for to-day might have been justified in not relying altogether on your turning up for it."

The young man's fair, ingenuous face flushed deeply.

"I suppose somebody's been telling you that I was drunk," he retorted. "Well, I wasn't. And if a feller can't take his whack without a lot of old women gabbling about it . . ." he was working himself into a rage and the Skipper interrupted with an unlucky but well-meant piece of advice.

"Then he's got to remember that the old women can

queer his pitch with the young ones and that he'd be wise to shape his course accordingly," he remarked.

For a moment Bevis seemed about to break out in an even angrier retort, utterly ignoring the respect due to the other's age and friendship of long standing; but he checked himself, and muttering under his breath that he hadn't come to the Club for a temperance lecture, swung off in the direction of the smoking-room, where, through the open door, Lindham heard him ostentatiously ordering a whisky and soda.

"Young fool!" he said angrily to the empty room. But his anger deepened to uneasiness, as from his point of vantage at the window, he saw ball after ball driven off from the first tee and listened to the voices and the clinking of golf bags growing fainter in the distance, and Bevis still stayed in the smoking-room. Why the devil couldn't he take his grievance like any other man, and go out and forget it in a keen game, and not let his rival have the satisfaction of having spoilt his afternoon as well as cut him out?

But presently Fairlie turned up again, and in the course of his game the Skipper at least forgot those grievances with which he secretly sympathised, and was only reminded of them on walking into the tea-room and seeing Clover and her partner sitting there.

"Uncle Bill!" she called out gaily as he passed their table. "We were all square at the fourteenth; not so bad for me, was it?"

"You're taking your eye off," he said gruffly. "I watched you driving."

He didn't stop to say any more. The Skipper's prejudices were very wholehearted ones. Since he strongly disapproved of the rapid progress of Karslake's friendship with Clover, it annoyed him even to see the man sitting there, and looking, damn him! as though his actual

existence were bound up in her least little action—even the manipulation of the tea-things by her slim, capable hands. He didn't put it to himself quite in that way; it hadn't yet consciously dawned on him that this *was* the right description of Karslake's attitude.

As a matter of fact, it wouldn't have been the right description until to-day. Since last night a new factor had crept into the relationship between these two. In spite of the abrupt way in which their *tête-à-tête* on the balcony had ended, there had leapt to the surface in that brief moment an ardently, almost fiercely personal note. It had shown itself in Karslake's voice and eyes, in his whole manner, too clearly to be mistaken. Whatever had been his reason for drawing back, Clover could hug to herself the glad conviction that she meant a good deal to him, that all this while she hadn't just been the object of graceful courtesies that meant nothing, being not entirely English in character.

As for him, one imagined that now he should scarcely need the answer that he had refused to take to that question of his last night. The colour was mounting to her cheeks under his intent gaze; her usual cool self-possession was obviously a thing that required some effort.

It was a busy day at the Clubhouse that afternoon; people had met, not only to play golf, but to discuss the theatricals and the dance. The club steward and his assistants were kept busy among the tea-tables, which were almost all occupied, when a tall young man appeared in the doorway leading from the smoking-room, and stood searching the crowded room with a belligerent red-brown eye.

Clover caught sight of him and waved a beckoning hand.

"Bevis! come here and account for yourself," she called out with mock indignation. "What do you mean

by never turning up after lunch and leaving me in the lurch?"

"I did turn up." He defended himself indignantly. "And it wasn't my fault that I was late; my watch had stopped."

"Oh, bad luck!" Her tone was sympathetic, but not exactly consoling. It was so obvious to the luckless Aylmer that she didn't require any sympathy for herself.

"Have tea with us, now that you *are* here," she added hospitably.

He pulled up a chair on her other side and nodded in an off-hand surly fashion to Karslake. (Bevis, in his present mood, was the last person to remember that he owed any civility to his host of the night before.)

"You didn't give me much grace," he grumbled now, when the steward had taken the order for another tea.

"Sorry, my dear boy; but you distinctly said half-past two, didn't you? And I couldn't hang about waiting for you. I'd promised Aunt Letty to come home early today. She won't believe that I don't require a rest after the fearful strain of the theatricals."

Clover was busy pouring out tea. She missed the danger signals in Aylmer's flushed, sullen face.

"I'll motor you back," he said. "My mother didn't want the car after all."

"Oh, thanks very much; but"—she hesitated—"when you didn't arrive, Mr. Karslake said he'd take me, so that's all right. I've telephoned to Aunt Letty that she needn't bother to come out again." The dead silence in which this was received made her add hurriedly, "You're terribly lazy, you know, Bevis! Why don't you sometimes walk up instead of motoring? If you take the short cut across the park, it's not more than a mile and a half at the outside."

Bevis laughed shortly and unpleasantly.

"Better ask Karslake why I don't," he retorted. "The door in the palings has been locked for some time. Ruth has had to go right round by the road whenever she had anything to do in the village; she always used it more than I did."

"Oh!" Clover turned blankly to the older man. For the moment she had forgotten the incident at the Danesthorpe lodge gates. "But I thought that path through the park was almost a right of way?" she said.

Karslake flushed darkly and unexpectedly.

"Oh, no. I understood that it was never quite that," he said in rather a disturbed voice. "And I'd no idea that anyone used it much." He turned to Aylmer. "Your sister should have told me," he said. "She must have thought me most unneighbourly."

Aylmer shrugged his big shoulders.

"It's *your* property," he said. "If you choose to keep people out, you've every right to. No one can force a man to do as his predecessors did, unless he happens to feel it a moral obligation. And one can't expect the traditions of Danesthorpe to mean anything to *you.*"

There was something unquestionably offensive in his emphasis on the pronoun. Neither Clover nor Karslake could have failed to notice it. An indignant flash lit the girl's eyes; Karslake ignored the rudeness.

"Perhaps not; but my neighbours' convenience does mean something to me," he said quickly. "I'll send over a key for your sister's own personal use, so that she can go through whenever she wants to."

"For Heaven's sake don't!" said Aylmer irritably. "There's no need to make a favour of what we can very well do without. Though," he added unpleasantly, "what the hell you're afraid of, that you want to barricade yourself in like that for, beats *me*. However, you know best."

This time the offensiveness of his tone was even more

marked. Clover intervened with a dismayed sharpness.

"Bevis!" she exclaimed, "I don't think you can possibly realize how abominably rude you are being!"

Upon which Aylmer's smouldering temper flamed up.

"Hanged if I see that I am," he retorted. "Everyone isn't bound to follow like a flock of sheep, if a neighbourhood chooses to make silly fools of themselves over a . . ." he hesitated, then finished with deliberate insolence—"a rank outsider," he said.

It was unpardonable.

Karslake's retort came quick and sharp; he had been driven at last beyond the limits of his patience. The lines of his finely cut lips suddenly hardened.

"Nor, thank Heaven, is it necessary to take any notice of the bad manners of a provincial boor," he said, with smooth contempt, "particularly when that boor is not, perhaps, completely sober."

The thrust put entirely to flight the remnants of Aylmer's fast-vanishing self-restraint.

Crimson with rage, he was on his feet before the other had finished speaking. What followed was over so quickly that, secluded as they were in their corner of the room, surprisingly few people noticed the incident, and of these, all but two fancied that they were looking on at a harmless piece of horseplay.

Karslake rose almost simultaneously, and anticipated Aylmer's savage blow across the little table by a movement so swift that Clover, shrinking back in her chair in horrified dismay, couldn't follow it. All she knew was that for a brief second or so, the two men clinched; or rather it seemed that Aylmer's arm was locked and held powerless in some curious fashion in the other's grip.

Then an involuntary exclamation of pain broke from him and they fell apart—Aylmer to stand in sullen indecision, rubbing his right arm mechanically with his left

hand, more than half-sobered by the shock of a contact which had evidently been unexpectedly sharp and painful. Karslake—watchful, unruffled—spoke with a deadly suavity.

"I am sorry," he said, "to have been obliged to use an unpleasant method of reminding you that there is a lady present. If you care to renew our discussion later . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders.

Captain Lindham, who had been watching the three with decided uneasiness, noted that shrug as a fresh cause of offence against his *bête noir*. He couldn't hear what was being said, but he had given the little scene something of its true interpretation.

"Infernal young ass!" he muttered savagely, half under his breath. "Does he think that's the way to oust Karslake from any girl's good graces?"

Major Fairlie's dry chuckle smote unexpectedly upon his ears.

"He'll get a broken arm while he's trying it, if he ain't careful," he commented.

"Hey?" The Skipper turned and stared at him questioningly.

"Jiu-jitsu hold," the other remarked laconically. "Damn painful unless you chuck your hand in at once. Young Bevis has chucked his in . . . for the time being. See?"

Lindham saw. Aylmer, flushed and scowling, was making his sullen way through the various little groups to the door, leaving behind him his barely-tasted tea and two people whom his turbulent outbreak had shaken roughly out of their pleasant drifting.

"I'm terribly sorry!" was all Clover could find to say as her companion resumed his seat, but she said it in a voice of such genuine misery that at once he sank his own justifiable annoyance in eager desire to console her.

"Bevis must be mad—quite mad! I can't tell you how ashamed I feel."

"But, good Heavens, why should you be?" Karslake exclaimed. "It was nothing to do with you; you weren't responsible . . ."

He broke off, searching for a more convincing argument. For after all, in a sense, she *was* indirectly responsible for Aylmer's outbreak, and they both knew it. The lovely hot colour mounted to her pale, clear skin, as she went on hurriedly.

"I can't *help* feeling ashamed, when someone whom I've known all my life behaves so abominably to . . ."

"An outsider," Karslake finished her sentence in a curiously quiet, flat voice. Taking the word at its face value, it was the truth. All these people—Clover Willoughby, the Aylmers, Lindham, and the rest—even Fairlie—were part of a little intimate circle, typically English, who knew all each other's business and family history; and he, who had just been openly insulted by one of them, stood apart from them all.

Even Clover, whom he loved all the more, perhaps, for that very element in her which marked her as different to himself—was more disturbed, it seemed, by Aylmer's lapse of manners than by the unpleasantness of the incident from Karslake's point of view. After all these months he was still . . . an outsider.

And after all, why should he wonder at it? Hadn't one of the chief attractions which the place had held out for him been the very fact that he knew nobody in that part of the world?

Juan Karslake had his own very good reasons for considering this a special advantage as regarded any neighbourhood in which he elected to settle.

An outsider—that's what he was; what he had originally been glad to feel himself.

He was suddenly aware that Clover was looking at him with eyes which were both hurt and reproachful.

"Why do you call yourself that?" she asked. "It's a horrid thing to say and it isn't true. Do *I* treat you as if you were an outsider?"

"No," he admitted with grudging honesty. "And I don't fancy you ever would, unless—" his voice dropped once more to that flat note of bitterness—"unless I were to make any demands upon you beyond what an outsider has the right to ask."

The fateful words were out, spoken beyond recall on a sudden headlong impulse. His scruples had gone by the board; the sheer frank sweetness of her went to his head and made him forget everything but this lovely thing whom he desired with every nerve and fibre of him. Her answer set the quick blood leaping in his pulses.

"And you think that I would, in that case?" she asked. "Well, I don't see how I'm to prove that you're wrong, until," she laughed in a soft, breathless little fashion—"until you give me the chance."

"Dare I?" He leant forward swiftly. "When one longs so keenly to ask so much . . ." Involuntarily he put out his hand and his strong, smooth brown fingers closed over hers, which lay on the arm of her wicker chair. The intervening tea-table hid his action from neighbouring eyes and she didn't draw her hand away.

"Yes?" she said softly.

"And when one realizes . . . what is at stake," he finished with sudden sombreness, "one becomes a coward."

(He might have added—blackguard. It was what he felt himself to be.)

Again her low laugh rippled out. That he should accuse himself of cowardice—this man who had just shown such insolently cool mastery over an antagonist who

could give him several inches in height and a stone or two in weight, was deliciously ironical! She read nothing deeper into his words; how should she? Bevis' jibe—that he locked himself into his own grounds for fear of something or someone—she had accepted for what it was, the meaningless insolence of jealous anger.

"Am I so very alarming?" she asked.

"You are the most utterly adorable person I have ever met," he returned simply. "If I thought that you could care for me even a little—a very little——"

"But I do!"

Half whispered though the words were, their frank spontaneousness was that of a girl to whom the sham reticences of flirtation were a sealed book.

He muttered something half-inaudible, ecstatic, as his eyes devoured her, while she, radiant and confused, poured milk into the teapot and helped them both to two different kinds of jam which neither attempted to eat. The succeeding moments, in plain view of everyone else in the tea-room, passed almost in silence. Both man and maid were thrilling to the anticipation of the drive home, alone together.

And it seemed to Clover, once they had left the Clubhouse far behind them and he had stopped the car in a little lonely tree-shadowed lane, that her whole life had been merely a prelude to the moment when she found herself in Juan Karslake's arms, his lips on hers.

Lack of any standards of comparison prevented her from realizing that his first kisses were marked by the most delicate restraint—a restraint that was utterly foreign to the man's temperament. Prevented her from even guessing at the tide of fiercely possessive passion which at the first touch of her soft mouth surged up in him, only to be strenuously held in check. He didn't want to frighten her; she wasn't his . . . yet, he told himself;

and he resolutely put away the thought that she might never be.

He drove her home to the Firs, where Letitia Cunliffe, who had always been entirely captivated by his charming manner, welcomed him cordially.

Clover would willingly have kept her happiness a secret for a little while longer even from her beloved Aunt Letty, but it was not to be hidden; the evidences of it were too glaring to escape the older woman's eyes.

And if the girl had had any qualms as to this matrimonial leap in the dark which she had pledged herself to take with a man of whom she knew so little, her aunt's wholehearted congratulations would have laid them to rest.

Letitia Cunliffe had never thought any of the young men whom she knew good enough for Clover. This man —quiet, polished, sympathetic—was another matter altogether.

Karslake stayed to dine at the Firs; he didn't need much persuading. And afterwards Miss Cunliffe tactfully left the newly-engaged couple alone in the drawing-room.

Clover was to remember that evening for a long while to come, with a sense of aching unreality; but at the time she was blissfully happy. A little bewildered, perhaps. Were all men like this in the early stages of an engagement—as ecstatically rapturous at one moment, as curiously grave, almost sombre at another?

It was, she supposed, the sense of a new and weighty responsibility. Perhaps she too ought to feel like that. But he gave her so little time to think—he wanted only to talk of her, and to hear her talk about herself; all her previous life from her babyhood upwards seemed to interest him keenly. The thousand and one questions which she wished to ask about him had scarcely a chance

of being uttered. They were crowded out, smothered in the love-making that was so new to her and so wonderful.

It was sheer joy to listen to the caress in his voice when he pronounced her name. She asked him what the Spanish of it would be, and he shook his head.

"There's no word in that language to fit you, you beautiful English thing," he said.

"Then talk to me in Spanish," she went on, sweetly imperious. "Say the things that you would say to a Spanish girl if you loved her. I want to hear what it sounds like."

A cloud darkened his face; but her cheek rested against his shoulder and she didn't see it.

"You wouldn't understand it," he told her quickly. "And if you were a Spanish girl, I couldn't love you as I do. My God, no! To-night of all nights I don't want to remember or to think of anything that isn't purely, utterly English—like you, my beloved."

"Then you'll have to forget yourself," she reminded him gaily, "and your own name; Juan . . . I love it! Juan . . . darling!" She whispered it with a shy laugh at her own daring, and he caught her to him and kissed her into silence.

He left the Firs at eleven o'clock and Clover drove down to the gate with him for a last goodbye.

"Mind you come back to the house at once after he has gone, dear," Miss Cunliffe abjured her as she saw them off at the hall door. "Remember that it's late, and this is such a lonely bit of road."

"It's all right at this time of the year," Clover protested, and Karslake assured the anxious lady that he wouldn't depart until he had seen her safely on her way up the drive again. "The gypsies only come at the hopping season, and there's no encampment at the bend of the road now."

"No, but they might be passing by. There was a strange man hanging about here this afternoon. Rachel called him a foreigner; he certainly doesn't seem to have been an ordinary tramp."

"Was he begging?" Clover asked idly.

"No, just asking his whereabouts."

"Where did he want to get to?"

Neither of the two women noticed the tense expression on Juan Karslake's face as he put the seemingly casual question.

"Well, Rachel couldn't make out. She thought perhaps he was trying to get work on some estate about here, but it's more likely that he was prowling round to see what he could pick up. He asked in what direction various big houses lay, and Danesthorpe was one of them. So probably," she laughed, "he'll turn up there sooner or later with designs on your pheasants or your fowl-run."

"Thank you for the warning. I shall be ready for him," Karslake said, with a grimness that passed sufficient muster as a jest.

Clover wrapped her fur coat about her and climbed into his big luxurious car, settling down beside him with a little sigh of content.

"If you dispose of everyone who molests you," she said, "as easily as you disposed of poor Bevis this afternoon, you aren't a very safe person to annoy."

His expression was contriteness itself.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said. "But what else was I to do? He brought it on himself."

"Poor Bevis!" Clover repeated again; and the most jealous lover couldn't have objected to her impersonal compassion.

"Well, yes! I can afford to pity him, can't I?" Karslake said exultantly.

She snuggled up to him, as they sped down the drive. "I wish it hadn't happened though," she said. "It makes things so uncomfortable, and I sometimes think Bevis is a little vindictive. He's been spoilt, you know."

Karslake laughed, and stopping the car just inside the gates, took her in his arms once more. She gave herself to his embrace with an abandonment which she hadn't shown as yet, and he crushed her close to him, holding her so tightly that he almost hurt her.

"Clover," he muttered a little thickly, "you darling! I can't let you go . . . I *can't!*"

"You must, now," she whispered back softly. "It's only for a few short hours, after all."

He gave an odd little broken laugh as he kissed her again and again. If the passion on which his control had slackened a little startled her, she didn't show it. Hers was the utter trust of a child, for all her twenty-four years. Then he let her go, cursing himself inwardly, and she walked back up the drive, flushed, breathless, treading on air.

There were thorns, of course, in her rosebud—but she didn't care. Her engagement wouldn't meet with Uncle Bill's approval. Still, she was her own mistress; there was no one to interfere. And nothing really mattered beyond the fact that she and Juan had surely been meant for one another ever since life began, and that the whole world was a new world since he had told her that he loved her. She could only revel in her own happiness.

The man who was the cause of it drove home at a rate that exceeded the speed limit by a good deal. He was no coward; but the possibility of a shot in the dark from under cover of the tall hedges was an unpleasant one. And life was doubly precious to him since this evening. So precious that he had deliberately put off any attempt

to tell Clover yet the things that she must know . . . and know soon. He couldn't bring himself to cast any shadow over these first few hours of their engagement.

Shadow?

Was that the shadow of a tree in the hedge, or had it moved?

He set his teeth and took the corner ahead of him at a reckless speed. Then on the straight open stretch beyond, he slowed down and took himself to task for letting his nerves get the upper hand of him.

For nearly a year there had been no sign that he could be sure of, and here in England, of all places,—law-abiding, efficiently policed,—surely he was justified in thinking himself safe at last? Miss Cunliffe's swarthy stranger was probably what she had suggested, a harmless gypsy . . .

He turned in at his lodge gates and forced himself to drive no faster than usual through the park and under the archway into the stable yard. He even lit a cigarette with a steady hand after he had put the car away and strolled back slowly to the house.

At the sound of his approaching car Castor and Pollux had bounded out to meet him and fawned round him in their noiseless, dignified way as they accompanied him into the house.

On the hall table were lying a couple of letters which had come by the late afternoon post. One was merely a typewritten receipt for a local subscription, the other bore a foreign postmark and stamp. It was addressed in a small, fine hand, and the thin envelope contained a half sheet of paper with two words printed on it in big characters. It was neither dated nor signed.

As Juan Karslake read it, the muscles of his face hardened, his jaw set grimly. Then he crumpled paper and

envelope into a ball, and dropped them on the glowing embers of the hall fire.

But Castor spent that night in his master's room, and Karslake slept with a small automatic under his pillow, and dreamt of kisses that had been too sweet to make life an easy thing to part with lightly.

CHAPTER XI

THE engagement was given out next day. Miss Cunliffe lunched at the Club with the engaged couple and broadcast the information triumphantly.

Nick Storrington wasn't there; so Clover rang up the Dower House on the Club telephone. She felt that she couldn't leave Nick, as one of her oldest friends, to hear the news from anyone but herself.

There was an appreciable second or two's silence at the other end of the line, after she had told him, and before his congratulations were spoken with an apparent warmth and sincerity that made her smile happily.

"Are you surprised or did you expect it?" she asked gaily, and was assured that surprise wasn't in the least what he felt. It was true. Shock, perplexity and blank dismay would have been nearer the mark.

"Anyway, I knew you'd be pleased," she went on. "Isn't it amusing to think that we shall be connections now! But we couldn't possibly be greater friends, could we, Nick, dear?"

He agreed with her that such a thing was quite impossible, and she hung up the receiver in blissful ignorance of his real feelings.

Other people were more candid, if not to her, at least to Letitia Cunliffe.

"I'm hanged if I can understand why you think it a matter for congratulation at all," Lindham said gruffly to the latter, as he and she lingered over their coffee on the verandah after Clover and Karslake had gone off to play a round. "Damn rotten business, it seems to me. What

do you know about the feller, anyhow? What are his connections, beyond the fact that he's a Karslake on his father's side? What's his past record?" He barked out each item like an angry dog.

"What does one know, definitely, of any man?" countered Miss Cunliffe serenely. "At least you can see that he's a gentleman, while he certainly doesn't seem to have any of the blatant masculine vices."

"What's his immediate family history?" the old sailor persisted. "What did his grandfather do with himself after he had been kicked out of Danesthorpe Hall? Tell me that!"

"His grandfather," said Miss Cunliffe glibly—(she had collected a certain amount of information last night at dinner)—"seems to have been a clever man, with the business head of the original founder of the house. He made a lot of money in oil mines in Central Europe, and his son, who married the daughter of an Englishman in the Embassy at Madrid, inherited it. Clover's fiancé is an only child. His grandmother, of course, was Spanish, of very old family, and the match with an untitled Englishman, however rich, was looked on by her people as a terrible mésalliance . . ."

"Exactly!" The Skipper's bark became a spluttering snort. "A Dago—that's what he is! Comes of a breed that will stick a knife into you as soon as look at you! And you're actually as pleased about the business as if the child had chosen a normal, decent young Englishman, like Bevis Aylmer, for instance . . ."

"With abominable manners, not too many brains, and the hereditary Aylmer temper." (Letitia could on occasions be terse and to the point.) "Here he comes, by the way. I hope to goodness we're not going to have another scene like yesterday's. You don't uphold him there, I suppose?"

"Am I likely to?" Lindham growled. "The young fool lost his head. But the whole thing's a bit rough on him, all the same. Hullo, Bevis!"

Aylmer had come over to where they sat, and stood glowering down at them, his hands in the pockets of his plus-fours, his rather heavy jaw grimly set.

"Is this true—about Clover and Karslake?" he asked abruptly, with no preliminary greeting.

"That they're engaged? Yes," the older man answered. For a moment Aylmer didn't speak.

"Look here," he burst out, "can't you do anything to stop it? Can't *anybody* do anything?"

"On what grounds?" Miss Cunliffe interposed coldly.

"On the grounds of ordinary common sense!" Aylmer said vehemently. "There's something damned queer about the feller—anyone but a pack of women must see it. You've said so yourself." He appealed challengingly to the old sailor.

"I don't know that I've ever said anything quite so sweeping as that comes to," Lindham said cautiously. "He's a bit un-English . . ."

"*Shady's* the word you want!" Aylmer corrected him emphatically. "Do you know that he never goes anywhere without an automatic in his pocket? I got that bit of information from one of the caddies, who carried his coat for him on that blazing hot day when we were playing out the finals for the Cup. Karslake took off his coat halfway round and I suppose he forgot the thing was in the pocket of it. Now, why does a man want to carry firearms in a quiet place like this? I tell you he's afraid of something; there's something in that past of his that he never talks about——"

"Oh, steady on, Bevis!" The older man shook his head. There was an element of melodrama in all this against which his sanity revolted. "After all, the feller's

lived in rough parts of the world, where men carry a weapon as naturally as they carry a cigarette-case; he's probably got the habit——"

"Why are the park gates kept padlocked, then?" persisted the young man doggedly. "They never were in old days. Nick has to keep *his* gates locked too, and the door in the side palings is fastened up. No one can use the short cut through the park——"

A fresh voice interrupted briskly. Ruth and Lady Angela Vyse had come up to them on their way out to the first tee.

"Are you still grousing about the short cut, Bevis?" his sister asked. "It's all right now. Mr. Karslake tells me that he's sending a key over . . ."

"Then it will go back to him," Aylmer retorted savagely. "I'm hanged if I'll have you accepting favours from the blighter."

"Good *Heavens!*" She raised her eyebrows. "And after all the fuss you made because that way was closed. Don't be absurd, Bevis. You can't be rude to the man."

"Can't I?" her brother retorted grimly. "Even if nobody else can or will, don't fancy that's going to stop me."

He turned on his heel and walked off, and Ruth Aylmer turned in some consternation to the other two, while her companion stared after him with knitted brows and lips compressed in a thin scarlet line. That Bevis should quarrel with Karslake over a point which everyone in the neighbourhood would know to be merely an excuse for venting his spleen against his successful rival was too maddening. She turned, forcing a smile, to Miss Cunliffe.

"Bevis is really the *touchiest* person I know," she remarked in her emphasized drawl. "It's a blessing that Mr. Karslake will be in *far* too beatific a frame of mind to-day to know whether anyone is insulting him or not."

"It *is* a mercy," Miss Cunliffe agreed drily. "One would have thought that Bevis would have learnt his lesson yesterday."

"What was that?" Ruth asked anxiously. "I hadn't heard."

Captain Lindham gave a brief account of the incident. Ruth exclaimed in dismay, and Lady Angela's little fair face hardened. Her small, capable hands itched to slap the absent Bevis at that moment. A scene like that in public, blazoning himself to the whole world as another woman's rejected adorer . . . !

"Very flattering and amusing for Clover Willoughby, that must have been," she muttered to Ruth as they walked away.

"Oh, I expect she hated it," Ruth said with conviction. Her loyalty rose in defence of her absent friend. If Clover couldn't bring herself to care for Bevis, that wasn't her fault, any more, perhaps, than it was Angela's fault for not being able, in her jealousy, quite to acquit Clover of the arts and triumphs of the deliberate coquette.

Lady Angela made an unbelieving grimace, teed up and sliced her drive badly into the rough.

The two only played nine holes and then walked in. Ruth had a headache and Lady Angela was off her game and impatient with the fact. The sight of Bevis just ahead of them, playing a sullen and solitary eighteen holes, didn't improve it.

"Come back to tea with me," she said, when they had disposed of their clubs. "I don't feel like having tea here this afternoon. Any chance of collecting Bevis, too, do you think?"

Ruth shook her head and gazed out under the shade of her hand to that solitary figure at present furiously hacking a ball out of a bunker.

"I'm afraid not," she said.

She would very much have liked to "collect Bevis." He and Juan Karslake were better out of each other's way at present; but she realized that it would be hopeless to try and drag him out to tea in that particular mood.

As it turned out afterwards, he had no tea at all that afternoon. On coming in, he went straight to the smoking-room and, making a fourth in a game of bridge with Fairlie and two other men, had more than one whisky and soda during the course of it.

Usually a sound player, to-day his declarations were erratic and his play uncertain. When he had paid his losses and departed, his partner remarked sourly that it was a pity young Aylmer had begun punishing the whisky in the way he was doing.

Fairlie made no comment, but the ten shillings which the young man's reckless play had put into his own pocket felt uncommonly as though it was burning a hole there, and on a sudden impulse he followed Bevis out of the room.

Even though he found Karslake interesting and congenial, as an old friend and neighbour of the Aylmers' he had also a sneaking sympathy for the unsuccessful suitor and felt it incumbent upon him to do what he could to see the young man through what was evidently a bit of an emotional crisis.

But his good intentions were foiled. Bevis refused the invitation to dine with him this evening none too graciously, got into his car and drove away.

Afterwards Fairlie bitterly regretted that he hadn't insisted and made a point of it; or failing that, foisted himself as a guest for the evening on the Aylmer household. If someone had only been at hand to influence the hot-headed young fool . . .

That night, Clover and Miss Cunliffe were having a

small dinner and bridge-party; but their tables were made up, which precluded Karslake from joining it and making an odd number. In reality he wasn't sorry. He wanted a few hours in solitude to decide upon his immediate course of action. He had allowed himself a day's grace—a coward's day, he told himself bitterly. Yet he couldn't regret it. Come what might now, he would have had that one perfect day.

It was ten o'clock that night when Lady Angela Vyse, on her way upstairs, retraced her steps to answer the telephone which rang suddenly in the little hall below, shrilling into the silence of the cottage with an almost eerie vehemence. Her maid had already gone to bed, and she took up the receiver rather nervously; it was such an odd hour to receive a telephone call.

"Hullo! . . . Yes, Lady Angela Vyse speaking . . . Oh, Ruth, is that you? How's the headache? Why haven't you . . . Good gracious! . . . Yes . . . yes, I see . . ." (There was consternation in her tones.) "My dear, of *course* I'll do what I can . . . He's started, has he? All right, I'll run down to the gate at once. Don't worry, and *don't* wait up . . . you can't do any good. Take an aspirin and go to bed."

She hurriedly replaced the receiver and stood for a moment in vexed thought. Bevis, it seemed, was determined to put himself in a hopelessly false position. Her brain worked swiftly in search of any plausible reason to give for intercepting him, and when she had finally decided upon one, she snatched up a scarf which hung in the hall, wrapped it round her shoulders and let herself out of the front door.

The moon, which had been at its full two nights ago, was still coldly bright, and a chill little breeze was blowing as she sped down the path to the gate.

The road here, by the White Cottage, was almost as lonely as by the Firs. Her nearest neighbours were the lodge-keeper at Danesthorpe Hall on one side, a quarter of a mile away, and on the other the old Manor House.

Of course Bevis couldn't be sober! No man in his proper senses would be so absurd as to start out for Danesthorpe Hall at this late hour, merely, as she gathered, to fling back in Juan Karslake's face the key of the park which the latter had sent over to Ruth. The thing was simply too childish. Yet her face softened as she listened for the sound of his footsteps and heard them at last coming down the road at a rapid pace. It was lucky that he had elected to walk instead of motoring. Some dim notion perhaps had inspired him that it mightn't be a bad thing to clear his brain a little by exercise in the night air before he interviewed Karslake.

"Hi! Bevis!"

She was out in the road, her vivid red chiffon frock blown about her like the gay bedraggled feathers of a little tropical bird which had found its unseasonable way into the incongruous setting of an English country-side.

"Hullo!" He came to a halt, staring at her with the bewilderment of a man whose thoughts have been roughly wrenched back from a far distance. "What on earth are you doing out here at this hour?"

She noticed that his speech was clear, if a little careful, and that though his face was flushed, he was quite steady on his feet.

"I might ask that question of you," she retorted lightly, "if it wasn't that I've just rung up your place and Ruth told me that you had started out to walk down this way. I rang up because . . ." once started, she lied glibly and with self-possession—"because I wanted your advice about Bones. I've been having him inoculated for dis-

temper, and he's taking it rather badly. Quite off his feed to-night and very heavy, poor little beast."

"That's often the way with puppies," he reassured her. "Don't bother him. Leave him to sleep it off and he'll be all right to-morrow."

"Well, will you come in and have a look at him, just to set my mind at rest?"

He hesitated.

"All right," he said. "I'll come in for a moment; but I've no business to, you know, when it's as late as this. Set people talking if they saw me."

He was sober enough at least to realize that, she thought rather ruefully. For she would rather, low be it spoken, that he had been a little less so, under the circumstances. To-night she was ready to snatch at any means of keeping him with her as long as possible; and since he wasn't sober enough to see what an idiotic step he was contemplating in this untimely call on Karslake, she would have preferred him to have at least reached that state when he would be the more inflammably easy to work upon by the methods which she had coolly resolved to use—the counter-lure of that sex attraction which almost any woman, if she sets herself to play upon the emotions of a normally hot-blooded man, can arouse in him.

"For that matter," she retorted, "you haven't any business to be calling on *anyone* as late as this; but Ruth said you were on your way to Danesthorpe Hall?"

"What if I am?"

His tone was slightly truculent. It didn't encourage discussion, even while his words seemed to invite it.

"Well, come in first and see Bones," was all she said; and as he followed her up the path in stony silence, she told herself savagely that it seemed as though she might have saved herself the trouble of waylaying him. In his

present mood he didn't appear a likely subject either for managing or cajoling; and when he realized, as he probably would do almost immediately, that there was very little the matter with Bones and that he had been inveigled in on a fool's errand . . . !

Well, she must just keep up the pretence to save her face, and trust that even this few minutes delay *en route* to Danesthorpe Hall might result in his finding the house shut up for the night.

. . . . . .

Ruth Aylmer woke from an aspirin-induced sleep to the sound of a distant door—the front door—closing somewhere down below. Then steps—slow, heavy steps—coming up the stairs and along the corridor and the closing of another door.

At once the subject which had been uppermost in her mind when she went to sleep, returned to it. She sat up and looked at her watch; it was twenty minutes past three. Bevis could never have been at the Hall all this time surely! He must have come in long ago. That couldn't have been the front door, although it had sounded like it. He had perhaps had a terrific row with Juan Karslake and had sat up late in the smoking-room after he had come in, brooding over his grievance.

Sighing resignedly, she turned over and went to sleep again. Whatever had happened—if Bevis had insulted his neighbour past all forgiveness—the thing was over now beyond recall. How much beyond recall, poor Ruth was not to know until some hours later, when the maid brought her early morning tea.

The girl burst into the room white-faced and breathless, all agog with the ghastly news which the postman had already begun to spread on his rounds.

Juan Karslake had been found this morning lying dead

in his library, shot through the head by his own automatic which lay on the hearthrug close to him. They had found him lying across the fender, face downwards, with his head right inside the grate among the still warm ashes, and his hands grasping the bars.

CHAPTER XII

THE blinds of all the windows at Danesthorpe Hall were drawn down. Its long façade showed blank and eyeless in the morning light.

Not fifty-six hours ago—music, laughter and a glow of light streaming out into the darkness; and now silence —blank and grey—the aching stillness that waits upon death.

Little groups of people were already gathered in the road outside the lodge gates, talking in subdued voices; for news of a tragedy in a country neighbourhood spreads like wildfire. It was a tragedy utterly without apparent reason. Rich, popular, in good health, just engaged to be married—what reason could there have been for Juan Karslake to take his own life? Surely it must have been an accident?

The police inspector arrived from the neighbouring town, and a servant hurrying down the drive on an errand to the village was eagerly waylaid and questioned.

Reporters from the local Press were reinforced before the day was out by men from the London papers. They called later at the Firs, but saw no one except Miss Cunliffe, who came down into the hall with a pale face and swollen eyelids showing the ravages of tears. Her niece, she said, was utterly stunned by grief and shock and could see no one. No, neither of them had any suggestion to put forward; they were completely at a loss to account for the tragedy. Then, in answer to further diffident questioning—"No, indeed!" with tremulous indignation. "Certainly there had not been the smallest

disagreement between the engaged couple, no idea whatever of any hitch in the contemplated marriage. The whole thing was inexplicable, excepting by the assumption that it had been, as she felt sure, an accident . . ."

The reporters took their departure and the poor lady went upstairs again to that white-panelled bedroom scented with the hothouse flowers that the ardent lover had brought over yesterday morning, where a stunned, silent figure lay on the narrow white bed, dry-eyed, staring at the wall. Tragedy in youth's sweet-scented bower; a very fount of radiant joyousness stilled and shattered.

At Danesthorpe Hall, in a sort of ante-room to the big formal drawing-room which had been little more used in the dead man's time than it had been in his predecessor's, Inspector Benshaw was interrogating the servants.

The room had struck cold when he first entered it, but a fire blazed now on the hearth; the butler himself had set light to it.

"Mr. Karslake, he would have fires laid in every room in case he wanted to use them," he had said in a voice that was not quite steady.

It was clear that, like the rest of the household, the man was very genuinely shaken by the tragedy. Karslake hadn't been the kind of employer who is ever familiar with his servants; he had, perhaps, been even a trifle more autocratic than many masters; but they had apparently liked him none the less for that. As the housekeeper had once expressed it, "Mr. Karslake, he has his queer notions, not a doubt of it—mighty queer, some of them—and he *will* have his way too, and no mistake about it. But he's *human,* when all's said and done. And some of the gentry—more particular the jumped-up kind—they're *not.*"

A curious epitaph, when one came to analyze it; and

in its way not an unconvincing refutation of the depressing theory that "poor and weak and sinful humanity," *au fond,* is one of the Creator's least successful performances.

With Benshaw were the dead man's cousin, and Duncan Fairlie, who, like most of the nearer neighbours, had hastened up to the Hall with shocked inquiries.

Fairlie was *persona grata* with the Inspector, who had a definite respect, not so much for the veteran game-tracker's deductive powers, as for his gifts of keen observation. Once or twice before, in the few mysterious cases of minor crimes which had occurred in the district —a cattle-maiming affair and a bank robbery—the Major's amateur interest in crime and his lynx eyes had proved very helpful.

Storrington had been upon the scene since early this morning. A telephone message from the Hall had reached him before breakfast, and he had arrived on the doorstep at the same moment as Dr. Richards—a breezy little man of the old-fashioned type of general practitioner, whose expression at the present moment more than befitted the occasion in its shocked concern. Dr. Richards had known Clover Willoughby since her babyhood; his first thought on hearing of the tragedy had been for her.

"This is a terrible business," he exclaimed.

"Ghastly." Nick's fresh-coloured face was pale and drawn. "They rang me up . . . just now . . ."

He broke off abruptly.

The doctor laid a sympathetic hand on his arm as they hurried indoors.

It was to be noticed, as typifying the estimation in which Nick Storrington was held by everyone who knew him, that neither then nor at any time, did anyone conceive of his attitude towards the tragedy as being influ-

enced by thoughts of the effect which it might have on his own circumstances. Yet Karslake had been heard to announce definitely, more than once, that he hadn't a near relation in the world. Then what more natural, if he had made a will since succeeding to the property than that he should have left Danesthorpe Hall to Storrington? And even if he had made no will, wasn't it quite likely that Nick might still turn out to be his heir?

Saunders, the butler, unlocked the library door and admitted them into the room. He had apparently not been ignorant of the proper procedure in a case which involved a violent death. The corpse hadn't been touched, excepting for the cursory examination which had been all that was necessary to show that life was extinct. Even the automatic still lay on the rug where it had been found; and Saunders had turned his crowding fellow-servants out of the room and locked the door until Storrington and the doctor arrived.

He had, however, taken it quite simply for granted that his master had died by his own hand, utterly inexplicable though the action was; and it was Dr. Richards who sent for the police after the first five minutes of inspection.

Life, he announced, must have been extinct for about eight hours when the corpse was found at seven o'clock; but owing to the appalling disfigurement of the face, which together with the head, was charred beyond recognition, it was impossible to say whether the fatal shot had been fired at close enough quarters to make the theory of suicide tenable.

There were two holes in the head where the bullet had gone in and out,—in through the right temple and out behind the left ear; but the flesh had been so burnt away that there were no signs either of the scorching which accompanies a self-inflicted wound or of its absence.

"It may be suicide," was his verdict, when he had finished his examination, "but on the other hand, I can find nothing to prove definitely that it is not a case for the police."

Storrington had been standing by, pale but grimly resolute, while the doctor went about his gruesome task. His eyes, which after the first glance had been rigidly averted, returned now to the limp, lifeless object over which Richards was still bending; their glance passed swiftly over the sprawling limbs, garbed in the conventional evening clothes that seemed to emphasize their unnatural pose, and travelled as though fascinated up the white shirt front towards that scorched, charred collar and tie . . . and what lay beyond.

Not twenty-four hours ago, those tragic remains had been a debonair young man, more than commonly attractive, more than commonly vital. Most things that life can offer had been his for the taking,—even that crowning gift, a love returned.

Nick Storrington made a sudden involuntary movement.

"Poor devil!" he muttered under his breath,—"poor devil! To happen just now . . ." His eye caught Richards, "You know that his engagement to Clover Willoughby was only given out yesterday?" he said in sombre tones.

The doctor nodded. "I was dining at the Firs last night," he said sadly. "And that makes the thing even more bewildering . . . if it *is* suicide."

"He told me once that he never meant to marry," Storrington said in the uncertain voice with which one puts forward a suggestion whose relevance is not quite clear, even to oneself.

"Did he?" Richards looked up sharply and then down again at the dead man. "That's odd . . . for a man of

his age and in his position. I wonder now," he pursed his lips thoughtfully, "whether there was some other tie,—if perhaps he wasn't quite free? That puts a new complexion on things, that he should have said a curious thing like that. How did he seem lately,—depressed? unnaturally exhilarated—eh?"

"I couldn't tell you," Storrington said. "I hadn't been seeing so much of him as usual, these theatricals were taking up most of his time. But he seemed in good enough form at the dance."

The doctor was silent a moment. Then he asked much the same question which later in the day the reporters also put to Letitia Cunliffe. "There hadn't been a quarrel between the young people, do you think?"

"I shouldn't imagine so. Why, they'd only become engaged the day before last."

Richards made a gesture as of one utterly nonplussed. "And some one will have to break this hideous thing to the poor child," he said.

He took the task on himself later after the Police Inspector and two of his men had arrived. The breaking of bad news so often falls to the lot of the luckless doctor.

Inspector Benshaw, a big heavy man with a manner incongruously brisk, was noncommittal at first, but obviously inclined to accept the theory of suicide.

The automatic, with its corroborating evidence of one spent cartridge, belonged to the dead man; the footman whose duty it was to valet him, identified it. He had seen it in a drawer in Mr. Karslake's room, and he believed that his late master was in the habit of carrying it about with him.

"Curious habit, that," Benshaw commented briefly.

It *was* curious, undoubtedly. Neither Storrington, nor Fairlie, who had turned up while the servants were being interrogated, had known of it.

Further inquiries elicited the fact that the housekeeper was the only person who had heard the shot. All the other servants' rooms were at the far end of the house, shut off by a heavy door and looking out the other way. She said she had heard it distinctly and thought it was the back-firing of a motor-bicycle. The chauffeur had one; and he had taken an evening out as his master hadn't required him. He had talked of going to a local subscription dance, and she remembered thinking it was odd that he should have come back at such an early hour.

Also, seeing that what wind there was came from that quarter, she wondered that she hadn't heard the sound of the machine coming up the back drive that led to the stables from the village. The time she mentioned—eleven o'clock—tallied with the hour when Dr. Richards declared that Karslake had shot himself . . . or been shot.

The butler's evidence came next.

A quiet, middle-aged man, Saunders—a born butler, as it were—noiseless and deft in his movements, precise and respectful of speech, unobtrusively capable and obliging. He had the nondescript, expressionless face of his type, a complete mask with intelligent eyes.

This morning the mask had slipped a little. Saunders had been roughly shaken out of his smooth rut. It was easy to believe of him as of most of the servants, that it wasn't only the change of masters and the possible loss of a good place that weighed on his mind. It seemed that the automaton was after all, as the housekeeper had declared his late master to be, human.

He told the Inspector that while he was locking up for the night as usual at ten o'clock he heard Mr. Karslake speaking at the telephone in the library, and telling someone that he would expect him or her in about half an hour's time. Saunders didn't think anything of it one way or another, because Major Fairlie—he made a re-

spectful inclination of his head in the latter's direction—dropped in occasionally after dinner; and Mr. Anson, the Vicar, had done so once or twice. Seldom so late as this, however. His master had told him to bring two glasses into the library with the whisky and soda, and not to wait up. Saunders went to bed; and then, close upon an hour later, remembering that he hadn't put out the big hanging lamp in the conservatory, he came down again. The conservatory had several doors, and through that particular closed door which led into the library, he heard voices. He couldn't swear to the second voice, but it was raised in argument . . . or it might have been anger.

This was Saunders' evidence.

One thing was certain,—the other voice belonged neither to the parson nor to Fairlie. The former had been dining last night at the Firs, and Major Fairlie, who had spent the evening quietly at home, happened to be aware of this fact. Telephone inquiries to the Rectory elicited the further information that the party, playing bridge, had not broken up till the unusually late hour of midnight. It was therefore clear that neither of these two men could have been the visitor whom Karslake had expected at half-past ten, or the owner of the voice which Saunders had heard.

This entrance of a second party into the affair put it on a completely new basis. Benshaw, having dismissed the servants, repaired to the library for a fresh inspection, and the two other men went with him.

As they passed through the hall, the stillness of the house was suddenly broken by a most melancholy sound from somewhere upstairs; the howling of a dog,—and something more than a dog. There was in it that curious, unmistakable note of the wolf.

"Hullo! Isn't that one of the Alsatians?" Storrington asked.

With one accord the three men had come to a standstill, gazing up the broad staircase. The tremulous whine echoing through the vast empty spaces of the big house was inexpressibly mournful.

"Yes, sir." Saunders had started as he heard it. "It's Castor. Mr. Karslake told me last night at ten o'clock to take the dog up to his own bedroom. Castor was to sleep there instead of on the loggia."

"Oh! I wonder he didn't take the dog up himself when he was ready to go," Benshaw said.

"He did the night before, sir."

Again that piteous whimper, rising to an eerie, full-throated howl.

"I expect he feels strange, being left there so long," Saunders said hastily. "To tell you the truth, sir, we clean forgot him, poor beast."

"You'd better go and let him out," Storrington said shortly. The sound was getting on his nerves. Didn't some people hold that dogs recognized the presence of death in the air? Wasn't a dog's howl often its lament for a passing spirit?

"Where's the other dog?" Fairlie asked.

"I don't really know, sir. He's usually loose in the garden at night, and I haven't seen him this morning. He'll turn up for his dinner at midday."

But Saunders was wrong. Pollux didn't turn up for his midday meal. One of the gardeners found him before the day was out, cold and stiff in the Temple summer-house—poisoned. There was froth on his formidable jaws, and his big body was contorted in the death agony.

The three men went on into the library and shut the door after them. Memories of various occasions when poor Karslake had hospitably entertained him in that room, came back to Duncan Fairlie as he entered it in the Inspector's wake. The shadow of the tragedy seemed

to have entirely altered it, striking a chill to his very soul as he noted the cold grey ashes of last night's fire in the grate and the sickly odour of scorched flesh which still hung about the place in spite of the fact that the body had been removed by the Inspector's assistants during the questioning of the servants.

So certain had everyone been at first that the case was one of suicide or accident, that nobody had thought of subjecting the room itself to a very minute scrutiny. The curtains of the nearest bay-window had been drawn back to let in the light, but the two others had not been touched until now, when the furthest one revealed itself as having had one of its curtains partly torn off its hooks. Close by a small table lay overturned, and some miscellaneous objects were scattered on the floor,—a brass statuette of an Indian god, some ivory carvings and a couple of long African knives—things which Karslake had collected on his travels.

It was easy to see how, up to the present, all this had escaped notice. A big ottoman had completely screened off this part of the room from that end of it where all interest had so far been centred.

One of the knives was not in its carved wooden sheath. It lay a little distance away, not far from where a sinister looking patch stained the light carpet.

"Steady, sir!"

Storrington was just about to pick up the unsheathed knife when the Inspector hastily intervened with a cry of warning. He himself strode forward and lifted it gingerly, holding it by the blade close to the hilt. The lower part of the blade bore a significant discoloration. He whistled long and softly.

"The butler was right," he announced. "There *was* another man here last night; and what's more, there must

have been a bit of a struggle before the shot was fired that killed Mr. Karslake. One of 'em got hurt in that struggle with this." He eyed the knife with interest. "Probably the other man, since the corpse hasn't any visible wound on him, barring the bullet holes." He was silent for a moment, his eyes measuring the distance between the window and the fireplace.

"The other fellow," he went on, "must have got Mr. Karslake's automatic away from him in the struggle, and followed him up and shot him—perhaps as he was trying to get to the electric bell by the fireplace . . . Yes, that would be it, Major." He turned to Fairlie as he reconstructed the crime with professional zest. "Shot him; made sure he was dead, then dropped the automatic beside him. Some idea perhaps of trying to make it look like suicide. But after that I fancy that he must have lost his head and bolted."

Fairlie nodded.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" he remarked thoughtfully. From the débris on the floor and that sinister stain, his eyes wandered again to the window as though trying to visualize what had happened.

"What were they doing at this end of the room?" he mused suddenly. "The drinks were over there, weren't they?"

Benshaw uttered a quick exclamation and hurried over to the little low table which still held the tray of syphon, whisky decanter and a couple of glasses.

Storrington followed him and they both bent over the table with their backs to Fairlie. He heard Benshaw complain with keen disappointment that neither glass had been used,—there would be no finger-prints; but for the moment something had attracted his own attention to the exclusion of all else. He moved a step or two,

bending forward and peering at the left-hand side panel of the deep window. His eye had been caught by a small, newly made scar in the wood.

It might have escaped the notice of anyone who was not very much on the alert, and would probably have conveyed nothing to the mind of a person who hadn't often seen such marks before; but Fairlie, after a closer glance, straightened himself with a curious indrawing of his breath.

A bullet had recently entered that panel.

And remembering that only one shot had been heard last night, according to the housekeeper's emphatic testimony, he knew, with a sudden bewildered quickening of his pulses, that a few moments' careful work with a penknife would almost certainly extricate the actual bullet that had passed through the head of the man who had been found dead this morning on his own hearthrug.

Bewildered . . . because at once it was perfectly clear that the Inspector's reconstruction of the crime must be all wrong. No bullet which killed a man standing by the fireplace could have entered this particular window panel; the angle of the wall made it absolutely impossible. If Juan Karslake were killed instantaneously as the doctor had declared, either this wasn't the bullet that killed him,—and it *must* be, Fairlie said to himself; —or he hadn't been shot while he was standing by the fireplace at all. And if he hadn't been killed while standing there, why in Heaven's name . . .

A flood of amazing, unbelievable conjectures swept over him. Ugly things, some of them; damned ugly. Queer things, irreconcilable with what he had guessed of the dead man; the more sinister for their very nebulousness. He stood silently, sifting them through his mind, rejecting some of them, dallying with others. Then he turned swiftly.

After all, he was here principally as the friend of the late owner of Danesthorpe Hall, not as a policeman.

It was Benshaw's business to find that bullet, and the odds were that he wouldn't; that no one would. They had looked for it in quite another direction. He joined Storrington and the Inspector, who was busy wrapping up the blood-stained knife.

"Where have you had the body taken?" he asked.

"Into the billiard-room," Benshaw said. "You don't want to see it, do you? I shouldn't advise you to, Major, really I shouldn't." He looked at Fairlie doubtfully. "You won't even recognize him. He must have fallen into the fire while it was still red hot, and it has burnt him out of all recognition. His face is practically burnt away and his hands are terribly charred. Very painful sight, to anyone who knew him."

"I expect I've seen worse in my time," Major Fairlie said. "But if you don't mind, I'd rather see it alone."

"Oh, certainly, Major." The Inspector could understand that. The men had been friends and neighbours; this hardened veteran of many campaigns would no doubt hate to show any signs of emotion before an audience, and the sight he was about to see was, as Benshaw had warned him, a gruesome one.

"And if you don't mind," Storrington said grimly, "I'd rather not go with you. I've seen the poor fellow once."

Ten minutes later, Fairlie came out of the improvised mortuary wearing his usual inscrutable expression. It was true that he had perhaps seen even worse sights than that pathetic, horribly disfigured corpse; but he had seldom seen a more curious thing, or one that gave him to think more furiously, than a certain fact which he had just discovered in connection with it. One or two other things had struck him, but this was paramount; and it had dawned upon him after a moment or two's puzzled

scrutiny of the dead man's feet, cased in black silk socks and patent-leather shoes whose linings no doubt bore the stamp of an expensive west-end bootmaker.

But Fairlie didn't remove them to see. . . . From the point of view of his strange new discovery it wasn't necessary.

. . . . . ⁘ ⁘

Later that morning he appeared at the Golf Club; and shaking off with some difficulty the various groups who buttonholed him for information, joined Captain Lindham in his favourite corner on the sheltered verandah.

"Shocking bad business this," he remarked as he sat heavily down and ordered a gin and tonic.

The other nodded gloomily.

"Did you see the poor feller?" he asked in the subdued voice with which one usually alludes to anyone whose violent demise reminds one of the unwelcome fact that "in the midst of life we are in death."

Fairlie answered in the affirmative.

"Nasty sight, poor beggar," he added. "The housemaid found him first and called the butler. Quite knocked over by it, they both were. Karslake seems to have been tremendously liked by his servants; the maids are most of 'em in tears. But of course that class simply swims in 'em on these occasions. Part of the ritual."

"How was it none of them heard the shot?" Lindham asked.

"The housekeeper did hear it. Hers is the only one of the servants' rooms on that side of the house. She thought it was the backfiring of a motor bicycle."

Lindham was silent for a moment.

"It's a ghastly thing to have happened," he said. He hadn't liked the dead man, but that was neither here nor there. Poor devil! Perhaps Bevis Aylmer hadn't been so far out after all, in his idea that there had been some-

thing in Karslake's life which couldn't face daylight, something which, in the end, he couldn't even bring himself to face and so had taken the easiest way out. He finished his train of thought aloud.

"Always think a feller must be a bit unbalanced to do a thing like that," he mused. "It was the foreign streak in him, of course. Emotional . . . makes a man apt to lose his head . . ."

His friend interrupted with typical curtness.

"I shouldn't have said that Karslake was that kind of feller. I've watched him; he interested me. Remember how he behaved over that little affair with young Bevis, the very day before yesterday? Not a man to lose his head easily."

"No," the other admitted, "that's right enough. By the way, where is Aylmer? Bit of a shock for him, all this, after the way he's been raving against the poor chap."

"Haven't seen him to-day," Fairlie answered. "Look here, Skipper,"—a significant intonation crept into his voice,—"the less said about the bad blood between those two, the better."

Lindham stared. "Damn it all, man," he said, "you're not suggesting that Aylmer's attitude towards poor Karslake would have driven a normal man to take his own life?"

"I'm suggesting nothing of the sort," the Major said testily. "But there's a devil of a lot of harm done by chatter, in these cases. They're all hard at it now, aren't they? every jackass among 'em—hark to it!" as the buzz of excited voices came to them through every window in the Club. "Leu, leu! sick 'em out!" he mimicked softly. "But it hasn't entered one of their heads yet that it *isn't* a case of simple suicide at all." He bent nearer

to the other and lowered his voice. "It's *murder,*" he said.

The Skipper's jaw fell and his florid face paled a little.

"Good God! but . . . they found his own automatic close to him on the hearthrug, didn't they, with one cartridge missing from the magazine? Said he'd shot himself and pitched straight forward on to the fire——"

"*Been* shot," the Major corrected grimly. "And . . . this is for your private ear only."

He proceeded to retail Saunders' evidence, and the discoveries made since then by Benshaw. About his own discovery he said nothing.

His companion listened sombrely. Suicide was bad enough; but murder—in their serene, well ordered neighbourhood! Murder, with its hideous trail of mystery and suspicion, enveloping God alone knew who . . . !

He shook himself involuntarily as though to shake off an evil nightmare.

"Have they found the bullet?" he asked.

"No. Benshaw was still looking for it when I left. It went clean through his head."

The Skipper was too absorbed in the tragedy to notice anything curious about the other man's manner.

"Was it a case of attempted burglary, do they think?"

"Hardly. Nothing's been touched, and there were valuable things about."

"No reason to suspect anyone in particular, I suppose?" he hazarded tentatively.

"Well, Benshaw's naturally all out for the feller who sent that telephone message. He'll get the number from the local exchange, of course."

"Have *you* any theory about it?"

Fairlie didn't answer for a moment.

"No theory," he said at last, slowly. "Only the hell

of a lot of rum ideas that won't fit and haven't the remotest sense in 'em."

That was all he could be got to say.

The Skipper didn't attach a very great deal of importance to it. He knew that Fairlie, like a good many people, had his pet theories about crime and its detection. For himself, he was no great believer in either the intuition or the detective powers of the amateur. Each man to his own job, was the old sailor's conservative dictum. The police knew theirs, and were generally better qualified to attend to it than the critical public could be got to believe. If Benshaw suspected that the man who had telephoned to poor Karslake last night was the murderer, Benshaw would know how to lay hands on him.

Captain Lindham sighed heavily, heaved himself out of his chair, and set off to the Firs to offer what help and comfort he could to his old friend's daughter in her bereavement.

On the way he met Dr. Richards, who stopped to exchange views with him upon the gruesome subject which was already absorbing the whole neighbourhood.

"When I think," he exclaimed with deep feeling, "that here was I laughing and chatting with poor little Clover last night, at the very hour when that poor fellow was being murdered—it's horrible, Lindham! Don't know when I've ever been so badly shaken before."

But both men were to receive almost as severe a shock within the next few moments.

A car drove round the corner and was almost upon them before they could make way for it. It was one of the Danesthorpe Hall cars, and Benshaw, the police inspector, was sitting in it, driven by Karslake's chauffeur.

"Any fresh news?" Richards called out as the Inspector slowed up to let them make way for him to pass.

Benshaw's answer was given grimly, with a marked

lack of the exultation to be expected in a police officer who sees his quarry in view.

"Yes," he said. "We've found out who telephoned up Danesthorpe Hall last night. It was someone from the Manor—a man's voice, so presumably young Mr. Aylmer. I'm on my way there now to inquire into it."

He drove on, leaving consternation behind him. Lindham and Richards looked at each other aghast. Each knew that the other was thinking of the rivalry that had existed between these two men, and of the hot Aylmer temper. . . .

A brief, forcible expletive from Lindham broke the stunned silence.

"My God, it can't be!" he exclaimed. "The thing's unthinkable."

"If it should be, it will have been an accident," Dr. Richards said hurriedly. "Oh, of course, it *must* have been an accident!" He was obviously trying to strengthen his own conviction by voicing it aloud.

The other went on unheeding. At that moment his thoughts, as the doctor's had been that morning, were all for Clover.

"My poor little girl!" he said heavily. "The lad she's known from her babyhood, and the man she was going to marry . . . oh, damn it, it's *hideous!*"

CHAPTER XIII

Inspector Benshaw glanced from Mrs. Aylmer's pale, disturbed face to that of the big, fair girl who stood with her back to the window, stolid, silent, conveying for all her silence a suggestion of something held in reserve that baffled him. From these two his keen hard eyes travelled to the son and master of the house.

There was more than a suggestion of something held in reserve here. There was a definite, dogged refusal to say more than he could help, a deliberate negation of any attempt to smooth the Inspector's way of discovery for him. Bevis Aylmer, unlike his sister, stood in the full light. It emphasized the dark shadows under his eyes, and his unusual pallor. And he clung obstinately to his story that he had not been to Danesthorpe Hall last night.

Yes, he had meant to go there, but on the way he had stopped at the White Cottage to have a look at Lady Angela Vyse's sealyham puppy which had been inoculated for distemper.

"That would be between ten and half past," Benshaw remarked. "And you stayed there . . . ?"

"About ten minutes or so," Aylmer said. The words seemed reluctantly dragged from him.

"And afterwards . . . you went on to Danesthorpe Hall?" suggested Benshaw quietly.

"No, I tell you!" Aylmer almost shouted the words with a sudden flaring up of his quick temper. He bore cross-examination badly at any time; and cross-examination on the subject of last night . . . last night! good

God! "I changed my mind. I went for a long walk."

"And what time did you return?" Benshaw rapped out the question.

"I don't know," Aylmer said sullenly. "I can't tell you. Fairly late it must have been."

"It was exactly a quarter past three," Benshaw supplied the information grimly, "when you went in at your own gates. One of the Danesthorpe Hall men-servants, —Mr. Karslake's chauffeur—was coming back early this morning on his motor bicycle from a dance and he recognized you."

"Really?"

Bevis made no further comment. He took a cigarette out of his case, struck a match and lit it with fingers that weren't quite steady. Inwardly he was cursing that officious motorcyclist whom last night he had cursed almost as fervently for nearly running him down. The Inspector went on.

"The same man brought me over from the Hall just now. I can have him in to repeat his statement if you wish."

"No," Aylmer said briefly. "If he says he saw me, I'm not denying that it was I whom he saw."

Mrs. Aylmer involuntarily drew a sharp breath of dismay and alarm, as the possible significance which might be deduced from this fact dawned upon her. Ruth went over to her and sat down beside her on the sofa, holding the older woman's trembling hand. Benshaw was silent a moment. Then:

"Look here, Mr. Aylmer," he said at last, persuasively, "you won't do yourself any good by keeping anything back. You'd far better make a clean breast of what happened. We know at least that the automatic wasn't yours, therefore it's only logical to suppose that there was no premeditation about the thing. That you called

on Mr. Karslake last night, that you quarrelled with him, and that he, being as you might say not quite English in his ways, misunderstood you and out with his weapon . . . Why, it's all simple enough. A struggle, an accident . . . There you are, manslaughter at the worst. Come now, let's have the right story."

"I've given it you," Bevis said doggedly. "I never went near Danesthorpe Hall last night. I haven't seen Karslake to speak to since the day before yesterday at the Clubhouse . . ."

He broke off short, his jaw set hard, his eyes narrowed in retrospection. Ruth Aylmer's hand tightened unconsciously on her mother's. Something of the feeling of a bird in a fast closing net was upon her. How long would it be before the Inspector found out on what ugly-looking terms her brother and the dead man had parted that afternoon?

Benshaw shrugged his shoulders.

"And you expect me to believe," he asked, "that after leaving the White Cottage you changed your mind suddenly about going up to the Hall and tramped the roads for over four solid hours? Well, have it your own way; but I may as well warn you that you'll get no jury to believe it."

"Jury?" Mrs. Aylmer repeated the word in tremulous dismay.

Benshaw rose.

"If you won't say any more, you won't," he said. "The inquest will be held to-morrow at the Hall. You'll be notified, of course. And take my tip, Mr. Aylmer, the Coroner will make short work of that story of yours. It's lame, that's what it is, believe *me*." He added, with an awkward but genuine show of commiseration for the stricken little family group, "I wish to Heaven, for everybody's sake, that it wasn't."

With that he went; and the door had scarcely closed behind him when Mrs. Aylmer's arms were round her tall son's neck, and her terrified anxious eyes were searching his.

"Bevis, it's true, isn't it? You *didn't* go to Danesthorpe Hall last night? You didn't quarrel with Mr. Karslake?"

He swallowed a lump in his throat, and his own arm tightened round her shoulders.

"No, I didn't," he said very slowly and distinctly. "When I told Benshaw that I hadn't spoken to Karslake since the day before yesterday, it was God's truth."

"Oh, my dear!" She released him and sank back upon the sofa, crying softly.

Ruth spoke low and quickly.

"Bevis!" She had moved again to the window out of earshot of her mother, and he followed her there. "That man will go down to Angela now. Is there any hope . . . I mean . . . Did she see you off at the gate when you left? and will she be able to say that you *didn't* go on in the direction of Danesthorpe Hall?"

He shook his head.

"No; she didn't come any further than the hall door," he admitted reluctantly. "Besides, what good would it be if she did say that? The fact remains that when Karslake's chauffeur passed me I was coming from the direction of the cottage, and . . . Danesthorpe Hall. I could hardly have taken four hours getting here from the Cottage, could I?" His laugh was entirely mirthless.

"Then . . . you *did* . . ." She broke off with a helpless little gesture. "Oh, Bevis, don't you *see* how unbelievable it all sounds?"

"They can't *prove* anything against me," he said doggedly.

"I'm not so sure." She spoke under her breath, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Don't worry, old girl." He assumed a cheerfulness which he could scarcely have been more remote from feeling. "Anyway, Benshaw won't find Angela to-day. She was going up to London by the early train this morning and doing a theatre and spending the night in town. She won't even know what's happened down here until she reads the papers."

"It will be in all the evening ones," Ruth said.

It was. The flaring posters caught Lady Angela's eye as she came out of her hotel that evening and got into a taxi.

MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY AT DANESTHORPE, MERSHIRE.

VICTIM SHOT DEAD IN HIS OWN LIBRARY.

With a gasp of horrified surprise she beckoned to the paper-seller and hurriedly thrust sixpence into his hand in exchange for the paper which she snatched from him. Her eyes eagerly scanned the front page as she was driven away to the restaurant where she was meeting friends for dinner.

There it was, headed in large type, the day's sensation:

COUNTRY-HOUSE MURDER
UNKNOWN ASSASSIN

Lady Angela paled to the lips as she read.

Twice she read the column of facts and surmises as though they found some difficulty in penetrating her brain.

Last night it was . . . She sat back in the taxi, gripping the paper tightly, staring in front of her. Last

night at eleven o'clock. How ghastly to think that at that time, not a mile away from the White Cottage . . .

A shudder passed through her.

One didn't expect a dreadful thing of this kind to happen in the ordinary life one was accustomed to. It was horrible . . . horrible! And it brought fresh complications into her own life—complications which carried alarming possibilities with them.

Self-centred and spoilt though she was, Lady Angela switched her thoughts back here, with a quick pang of remorse. It was Juan Karslake of whom she should be thinking, not herself, not . . . other people. That poor man, brutally done to death under his own roof in the dead of night!

And she had liked him. He had been popular with most people, excepting Captain Lindham and Bevis . . .

Bevis!

All of a sudden Lady Angela gave a low involuntary cry and buried her face in her hands.

CHAPTER XIV

THE inquest was held at midday in the big dining-room at Danesthorpe Hall. That stately room had probably never witnessed a stranger scene.

John Haddoe, the coroner, head partner in an old firm of local solicitors, sat at the head of the big polished table, pen and ink before him and a writing pad on which he took occasional notes. At the foot of the table were seated the press-reporters; and the jury—stolid, nervous or important, according to their temperaments—were present in a tensely, expectant group.

They had been taken to view the corpse and they had inspected the scene of the tragedy. Dr. Richards' diagnosis of the cause of death had been detailed to them, and now they were ready to hear the evidence of the various witnesses.

The housemaid who found the body was the first to be called, and her evidence was followed by that of the housekeeper. Both women were nervous, and the housemaid slightly hysterical; but the older woman gave her testimony clearly and unhesitatingly.

The hour when she heard the shot would be about eleven; the small chiming clock in her bedroom had struck a few minutes before, and that clock was slightly fast.

The Coroner nodded and made a note of the time.

Saunders' turn came next; and as the incident of the telephone message was related, a perceptible stir went through the group of witnesses who were waiting to be called and such of the general public as had been allowed

in. A rumour had got abroad that some surprising revelations might come to light at the inquest. Here, it seemed, was the forerunner.

Mrs. Aylmer, her thin delicate face a mask of repressed emotion, had insisted on being present; and Ruth, unwontedly pale, sat on her brother's other side. One of the reporters on a London daily had nudged his neighbour—a local man—as she came in.

"Is that Miss Wiloughby?" he whispered.

"No," the other whispered back. "She's not here. They wouldn't even let her see him, poor girl. Can you wonder?"

The London man didn't wonder. He had himself inspected the gruesome lifeless remains of what had been described to him as an unusually vivacious and good-looking man; and the very remembrance made him feel rather sick.

Nicholas Storrington, the dead man's cousin, came in for the largest share of the press men's attention; he and Captain Lindham were close to the Aylmer party. Major Fairlie had taken up a position a little further off. He was there merely as a spectator, no evidence would be required from him; and his eyes missed nothing—no smallest manifestation of any emotion on the part of witnesses or onlookers.

The next witness was the Inspector, and when he had given his evidence Dr. Richards was called upon to state what he had found to be the cause of death. He finished his statement by adding, that owing to the agency of the fire which had destroyed all outward traces of the wound, it was impossible to say whether or not the shot which killed the deceased had been fired at close quarters. In other words, those signs which generally presuppose a self-inflicted death might or might not have been visible in the first instance.

The doctor retired and Bevis Aylmer's turn came next.

The Coroner had known him from his childhood—most of those present had done so; and his shrewd clean-shaven face hid decided anxiety as he noted the young man's set, resolute expression. He realized with a sinking heart that Aylmer's bearing was not what he would have expected from him as an innocent man. Distress, bewilderment, even truculent indignation at the idea of suspicion touching him—he would have expected any or all of these; but not that tense, close-lipped defiance, this dogged acceptance of his unpleasant position.

The witness answered the questions put to him in a low, perfectly expressionless voice. He admitted that he had telephoned to Karslake, and the sensation which this caused amongst the audience was electrifying. He added that he had started out to visit him and had changed his mind, after having stopped on the way at the White Cottage to see a sick puppy belonging to Lady Angela Vyse.

Silence fell in the big room when he had finished. The Coroner fidgetted with his pen. One of the jury whispered to his neighbour. Presently Mr. Haddoe looked up.

"The jury are to understand, then," he asked gravely, "that you did not see the deceased at all last night?"

"That is so."

"Your relations with him have hitherto been quite friendly?"

Haddoe was obviously putting the question merely as a matter of form. He had heard no rumours of any open quarrel between the two men. But Aylmer hesitated. He knew that his attitude yesterday afternoon as regarded Karslake's engagement to Clover must have been discussed pretty freely at the Club. One or two people beside Lindham had heard his remarks on the verandah. If this matter were to go any farther, it was obvious that

the bad blood between himself and the dead man was bound to come to light. So he answered bluntly.

"No, I can't say that they were."

The Coroner glanced sharply at him, and several of the jury stirred uneasily in their seats. Young Mr. Aylmer was popular in the neighbourhood; hot-tempered, as his father and grandfather had been before him, but open-handed and a keen sportsman. And the dead man, though well-enough liked, had been almost a stranger, and half a foreigner to boot. This bid fair to be a damnable business! With the damaging admission which Aylmer had just made, it was clear that a new and most unpleasantly significant factor had entered into the case. The reporters scribbled furiously, impressed by the witness's half-sullen, half-nonchalant manner and the strained attention of his friends.

Nick Storrington, who had sat perfectly motionless until now, one knee crossed over the other, frowned. The fingers of his right hand beat a soft, restless tattoo upon the arm of his chair.

"You say that you left the White Cottage at about ten-thirty?" The Coroner took up the thread again, this time with an even weightier gravity. "During the time that elapsed between your leaving the cottage and returning home to the Manor, do you affirm that you never entered the grounds of Danesthorpe Hall?"

"Certainly I do."

"At what time did you reach the Manor?"

"I couldn't be certain to a few moments. It was after three."

During the pause that followed Ruth bit her lip till it bled. She could feel her mother's arm trembling against hers. Oh, why wouldn't he say more than that? It was so bald, so damning in its obvious withholding of something beyond that bare affirmation. Whatever he had

done—however mad and foolish—she refused to believe that he would have committed the hideous crime of which his silence seemed to admit that he knew so much more than he would say.

Major Fairlie, standing just behind her, never took his eyes off the young man's face. Would Aylmer say anything? if indeed he had anything to say! And what sort of amazing story would be unfolded if he should elect to throw any light on the events of the night of the tragedy? Would that unfolding prove to be Fairlie's own cue to speak and reveal what Benshaw had missed, what the doctor hadn't seen, and what only the merest accident had revealed to himself?

The Coroner was speaking again.

"In case you are ignorant of the legal procedure in these cases," he said, "I must inform you that you are not bound to answer any question that commits yourself in any way. But at the same time, it must be clear to you that a refusal to answer may create a regrettable impression on the minds of the jury."

Bevis nodded.

"I understand," he said briefly.

Haddoe cleared his throat and leaned forward. "Can you tell us," he asked, "where you went to after leaving the White Cottage, that you didn't reach home till so late an hour?"

"I walked about," the young man answered. "Nowhere in particular; excepting——" he repeated his former statement doggedly—"that I never set foot inside Danesthorpe park. The gates are always locked, anyway," he added, "and the lodgekeeper will tell you that he never admitted me."

The Coroner made no comment on this statement. The retort was obvious that any active man could easily climb

the gates if he chose to run the risk of being seen and having his business inquired into.

Haddoe made a note or two, and then dismissed the witness with a further warning that he would be obliged to refer to the question again in his summing up of the case.

One or two more witnesses were called—among them a servant who identified the automatic as being his late master's property; a gardener who testified to finding the dead wolfhound in the summer-house; and the local veterinary surgeon who had pronounced the animal to have been poisoned. Old Owen, the lodgekeeper, also gave evidence that he had not been summoned to open the lodge gates that night since Mr. Karslake had driven through them on his return from the golf links.

Then the Coroner glanced through his notes, and amid a breathless hush proceeded to sum up. Among other points, he drew the jury's attention to the fact that while the poisoning of the dog might prove to have been merely an act of irresponsible malice which had no bearing on the case, such an act was scarcely likely to have been committed by anyone who, like the late witness, expected to be admitted freely into the house. He also pointed out that the proofs of a violent quarrel between two men were not necessarily proofs that the quarrel had ended fatally; the theory of suicide by one or the other after the quarrel was a perfectly legitimate supposition.

In spite of this, long before he had got to the end of his address the blackness of the outlook against Bevis Aylmer was terribly evident.

"If you are satisfied, gentlemen," the Coroner wound up, "that the cause of death is as Dr. Richards has stated it to be, it remains only for you to decide whether the evidence put before you is insufficient to prove that death was not self-inflicted. If, on the other hand, it

leaves no doubt in your mind that wilful murder has been committed upon the person of the deceased, it will be your duty to enter a verdict in accordance with your findings."

He sat down again with a nervous rustling of the papers before him. Never had he been called on to perform a more repugnant duty. The jury retired to another room to discuss their verdict, and during the ten minutes they were away the tension became almost unbearable. Captain Lindham, gloomily staring out of the windows, was thinking of poor Clover, and the extraordinary suddenness with which this most appalling tragedy had blasted her serene existence. Thank Heaven, at least they had been able to persuade her not to be present to-day.

What would he have to tell her when the proceedings were over, he wondered, fearfully? That Bevis had been arrested?

The jury were filing back. One glance at their gloomy faces confirmed his worst anticipations.

The last man took his place, the foreman rose to his feet, when there was a sudden commotion in the hall. A woman's voice, imperious, emphatic, parleying with the constable on duty. The Coroner's officer hurried to the door. There was more parleying; questions and answers in rapid succession; then he came back again and had a whispered colloquy with the Coroner. The latter turned and addressed the jury once more.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I understand that important evidence bearing on the case has just come to hand. I am sure that under the circumstances you will have no objection to my waiving the usual rules and admitting this belated testimony."

The foreman sat down again with a sigh of relief. So

far from raising an objection, any delay in his unpalatable task was a welcome one.

The dining-room door was opened again, this time to admit Lady Angela Vyse, accompanied by an agitated middle-aged woman, plainly dressed in black. Lady Angela herself had clearly chosen the least conspicuous garments in her wardrobe; but somehow the black sealskin coat which was wrapped tightly about her, the rakish little black satin hat under which very little of her yellow hair showed, had the effect, in combination with her round pale face and vivid lips, her long silk stockings and high-heeled shoes, of making her appear more startling in this gloomy setting than any other clothes would have done.

A deep flush spread over Aylmer's face at the sight of her, then died away, leaving him very pale. He made a quick movement to intercept her before she could take her place in the witness' chair.

"Angela! I won't allow this—it's quite unnecessary——" His tone was both disturbed and authoritative.

"Mr. Aylmer, I must ask you to sit down," the Coroner intervened sharply.

Lady Angela's heavily black-fringed eyes looked straight up into his angry troubled ones.

"What kind of little beast do you take me for?" she demanded in quick low tones. "When I got back this morning and heard that you'd been notified, of course I simply *had* to chip in."

She gave him a peremptory little push out of the way, took her place and was sworn in.

Her sudden, unexpected appearance had roused the interest and expectancy of the audience to its highest pitch. Nick Storrington sat forward and ceased that restless tapping upon the arm of his chair; Mrs. Aylmer

clasped Ruth's arm convulsively, while the latter sat staring at her friend with the gleam of a desperate hope in her eyes. Did Angela know what Bevis so obstinately refused to say? Would it save him?

Duncan Fairlie nodded his head with a grim expression of relief. He waited to hear her, as one who waits for a *dénouement* which he was, in some odd fashion, prepared for, although the actual form which it would take was a thing which he wasn't able to visualize.

The whole situation was intensely dramatic; but there was nothing dramatic in Lady Angela's manner or speech, as she answered the Coroner's questions in her usual, drawling voice, sitting perfectly still, her eyes never leaving his face for an instant. That was the only sign she gave that she was conscious either of her position or of the tension about her.

Yes; Mr. Aylmer had visited the White Cottage at about a quarter past ten last night. She had waited for him in the road and asked him in to see her sick puppy.

"You were expecting him, then?" the Coroner asked.

"Certainly. Miss Aylmer had rung me up and told me that he was on his way to Danesthorpe Hall. It is quite true that he and Mr. Karslake were not on very good terms, and I wanted to stop him if I could. I thought there might be . . . *unpleasantness,* don't you know? Some sort of a quarrel, perhaps."

"You tried to persuade him not to go?"

"Yes; I tried—and succeeded."

"Can you tell us, then, where Mr. Aylmer went, on leaving your house at ten-thirty?"

"He *didn't* leave it at ten-thirty. He stayed till three."

Sensation. An almost audible gasp ran through the room.

"Mr. Aylmer himself says that he left at ten-thirty," the Coroner reminded her gravely.

"He would naturally say so." Lady Angela's voice sounded perfectly unperturbed. "It's the only thing a decent man *could* possibly say. But it's not true."

There was a pause, filled with a breathless silence—indescribable. Mr. Haddoe fumbled with his papers and gathered his forces together to meet this unparalleled situation.

"You wish the jury to understand then, I take it, that the previous witness—er—lied?" he suggested at last.

"I do. I've brought my maid to corroborate my statement." There was an audible stir at the announcement. "She saw Mr. Aylmer leave the Cottage at three o'clock this morning. And . . . she very nearly gave me notice on the spot."

With that she smiled sweetly at the Coroner—"as brazen as you please," one of the Hall maids said afterwards. But a close observer would have detected the reckless bravado in that smile.

Ruth Aylmer, blushing scarlet for the cool, self-possessed little creature whose own pale face never deepened in colour, felt her heart warm to her as it had never done before. Mrs. Aylmer, half-stunned by the rapid sequence of events, was as yet incapable of realizing anything beyond the fact that Lady Angela's evidence, horrifying and regrettable though it might be from another point of view, was proving a most incontestable and providential *alibi* for Bevis.

The maid's evidence was taken.

She had heard voices in the drawing-room at about eleven o'clock, and curiosity had drawn her out of her room to the head of the stairs; she was perfectly ready to swear to its having been Mr. Aylmer's voice which she had heard. She had lain awake reading in bed for some time after that, and if he had gone away she would certainly have heard him. Later she slept and woke to hear

the front door open; she had looked out of the window and seen Mr. Aylmer walking down to the gate. Then she had heard her mistress shut the door and come upstairs to bed. She had looked at her watch and noted the time—had been, so her breathless audience gathered from her tone, scandalized beyond measure to notice it.

The poor woman was in a tremulous state of outraged indignation. She had been in service with Lady Angela's family before the latter's marriage, and her attitude towards her young mistress was one of intense devotion and helpless disapproval. Her evidence had to be fairly dragged out of her piecemeal, but once given it was unshakable.

When it was over, Bevis himself created another diversion from the orthodox procedure by insisting on being recalled.

"I'm not going to deny that I lied," he admitted. "It wouldn't be much use. But I should like to add something to Lady Angela's statement. When I arrived at the White Cottage last night I wasn't what you might call strictly sober. I had another drink there, and it was a pretty stiff one. Coming in from the cold outside, it went to my head quicker, I suppose, than it would have done in the ordinary way. The long and the short of it is that I fell asleep in the drawing-room in front of the fire, and when I woke up and took myself off, it was the hour she told you. I realize now that the reason why she hadn't kicked me out hours before that, was because she wanted to make quite sure that I shouldn't go to Danesthorpe Hall and make a scene. I can only apologize to her from the bottom of my soul. It's damn good of her to have come forward like this."

He didn't look at Lady Angela as he spoke, nor did she look at him. Ruth had sprung forward to meet her as she left the witness' chair, and slipped her arm through

hers and led her to a chair next to Mrs. Aylmer, where the Skipper patted her on the back in fatherly congratulation, and Dr. Richards echoed Bevis' last words with emphasis. Storrington left his chair to join them with a low-toned, "Angela, you sportswoman!"

Then once more the Coroner summed up, pointing out to the jury that the evidence of the last witness clearly annulled the value of certain statements which had been made before it, "and made," he added emphatically, "from motives with which no one could fail to sympathize."

The verdict was returned without further delay as one of murder against a person or persons unknown, and the ordeal was over.

CHAPTER XV

As they all trooped out, Mrs. Aylmer insisted that Lady Angela should drive back with them in the Manor car. In her gratitude to the younger woman, she was doubly desirous of championing her in the face of any scandalous conclusion which malicious minds might draw from the story which had just been made public.

They dropped her at the White Cottage, and Bevis, impatient for a moment or two alone with her, went in on the pretext of looking at the puppy, while his mother and sister waited outside.

In her little drawing-room, where Bones leapt out of his basket to greet them, extremely convalescent, she pulled off her hat and threw it on a chair, running her fingers through her fair hair and clasping them for a moment round her forehead, as though it were aching. Then she slipped out of her black furs and pitched them after the hat.

"I expect the medieval penance-sheet was more becoming," she said flippantly. "I feel simply a *fright*." After which she turned and faced him squarely with a curious, half-defiant little smile.

"You're an excellent liar, Bevis," she told him.

"Good God! What else was I to do?" he demanded. "Hadn't I been sufficient of a brute and a cad, without dragging you into this?"

"Well, I've dragged *myself* in now," she retorted.

"It was most tremendously sporting of you," he said gloomily, "but I wish you hadn't done it. I should have come out all right—bound to have."

"I'm not so sure. And you needn't worry. One isn't so *easily* compromised, these days; and as it is, that last imaginative flight of yours rather saved the situation. People are bound to *pretend* that they believe it. Some kindly fools," she added cynically, "may actually swallow it."

"I wasn't stone sober." He started to defend his own statement and then checked himself, cursing inwardly.

" 'Not drunk, but had drink taken'!" quoted Lady Angela with hard flippancy. But her eyes softened as they rested on his sombre face. "Very chivalrous and dear of you, but when all's said and done"—a flood of rich colour swept her from brow to chin, and her eyes fell before his—"what happened . . . here . . . the night before last, was every bit as much my fault as yours. Please understand that! I meant to prevent you from going up to the Hall . . . *anyhow,* even if I could only do it by making you want to stay with me. And . . . well, I did, that's all. And . . . I'm not sorry. No, I'm *not.* It's my own affair—no one else's."

Bevis glowered at her unhappily.

He felt that it was very much *his* affair. He really believed, in his masculine density, that the whole blame for that night's sudden madness of hot, uncontrolled passion, was his alone. He was desperately ashamed of himself.

Angela Vyse was his sister's friend, and he was, or believed himself to be, in love with another woman.

His behaviour had been utterably damnable. It was true that he had not been absolutely sober in the strictest meaning of the word, when he had arrived at the Cottage; but his walk through the chill night had already sobered him sufficiently to make him realize that he was setting out on a fool's errand. His manner, in fact, when Lady Angela had touched on the subject, had been all the more uncompromising because at the bottom of his heart he

realized that he would be glad of any excuse to back out of it.

He had been in just the mood when a straw would shift the balance one way or the other; and the cosy warmth of Lady Angela's drawing-room, with its softly shaded lights, its scent and the intimacy of its secluded stillness had only needed her inspiration of another whisky-and-soda to turn the scale in favour of staying where he was.

He had been, moreover, feeling injured and aggrieved. Clover had turned him down. Here was Angela, in her most provocative, alluring mood—infernally attractive in that daring little wisp of a scarlet chiffon frock that was not so much a covering for her slim, white little body, as a sheer invitation . . .

He wanted now to assure her that he was, of course, ready to make the only possible amends in his power; but some dim instinct, more reliable than anything else, told him that she would look upon the suggestion as an insult.

She was so markedly elusive to-day, so tantalizingly out of reach and impersonal. There came vividly to his mind in contrast the night before last, when he had held her in his arms, and had been drugged to the oblivion of all else by the sweetness of her kisses, the yielding softness of her, her unreserved surrender. He was feeling at loggerheads with his little world, which had just seen him only narrowly cleared from suspicion of a hideous crime. Clover was far and utterly removed from him by the tragic bereavement which seemed to set her apart in her sorrow. He was left with nothing tangible to anchor to, excepting Angela, and Angela in this unexpected aloofness of hers became at once a thing of paramount importance in his eyes.

"You can't expect me to feel like that about it," was all he said, however.

"I never expect anything of anybody," Lady Angela answered. "Let's drop the subject, shall we?"

But after he had gone, she threw herself on the sofa and cried bitterly, because her own attitude, deliberately adopted to save her pride, had made it impossible for him to do anything else.

Meanwhile Captain Lindham went off to the Firs after the inquest was over, to break to Clover Willoughby the information that twelve "good men and true" had cleared her lover of the suspicion of having taken his own life; but that somewhere on the same plane, in the same world as herself, there was living a dastardly scoundrel who had wrecked her happiness and murdered the man she loved.

John Haddoe, Fairlie and the doctor had stayed to lunch with Storrington. Not at the Hall, although Saunders and the housekeeper seemed quite prepared for them to do so. In fact already Mrs. Henslow's manner intimated unobtrusively that she looked upon Nick as the master of the house. Storrington, however, shrank not unnaturally from even the appearance of being ready to step into the dead man's shoes. He wasn't master yet. Once already he had in thought anticipated an inheritance which never came; he would not do it again.

So the four men had walked across the park to the Dower House; impelled perhaps, in the case of Haddoe and Fairlie, by sympathetic reluctance to leave Storrington alone in the vast, oppressive shadow, as it were, of that house of death. Dr. Richards, for his part, went because, in spite of the unemotional face which Storrington turned to the world, he could see that the strain of the whole ghastly business was telling on him, and he wanted to administer a little lecture on taking things quietly. In his capacity as a medical adviser who was hardly ever called in to advise, since Storrington—barring that old strain to his heart—had the constitution of

a horse, Richards wasn't quite satisfied with his appearance.

He wore an almost haggard air; this business must have been a terrible shock to him. And now, with his customary energy, he would probably be at the beck and call of the police, scouring the neighbourhood for his cousin's murderer, besides working late at night over business connected with the estate, business which could perfectly well wait until the family lawyer came down for the funeral and he knew exactly where he stood.

"It's a beastly thought," Haddoe remarked, "that the scoundrel who killed poor Karslake is probably lurking about the neighbourhood now."

"Benshaw seems to think he'll turn out to be one of these homicidal cases which have become so alarmingly common since the war," Dr. Richards said. "A demobbed soldier, out of work."

"I don't agree with him," Fairlie commented tersely.

"Nor do I," Storrington added. "There's no question but that my poor cousin went in fear of something or somebody. Whether we shall ever find out *what*, depends, I take it, on our finding the murderer. But everything goes to prove it—the locked gates, the Alsatians . . ."

"Ah, those wolfhounds," Fairlie interposed. "You see now why he sent the dog upstairs early that night? He knew that Bevis Aylmer was coming along to see him, and he expected Aylmer to start a row again, as he did at the Golf Club the day before. Showed his sense in getting the dog out of the way; those brutes'll kill anyone who raise a hand against their master."

Storrington nodded.

"Probably that *was* his reason. But anyhow there's not much doubt that he was out to protect himself, not from Bevis, but from something else that threatened him more seriously. Apparently lots of people knew about

that automatic which he always carried. Ruth Aylmer told me some time ago that people were saying curious things about him, but she wouldn't tell me what."

"It's an odd thing for a man to do here in England," Haddoe said thoughtfully. "Certainly one would say that he knew he had enemies; and the sequel seems to have proved it, poor fellow."

"That's *my* opinion," Fairlie agreed with him. "In fact, I'd stake everything I possess that if Benshaw drags the country for a semi-looney, he'll be barking up the wrong tree. The man who did that killing was no lunatic. He had his wits about him to a surprising degree."

Richards looked at him curiously.

"I'm hanged if I see how you make that out," he said.

But Fairlie had no explanation to offer. He was a firm believer in the policy of not stirring up muddy and unknown depths. It had often seemed to him that those proceedings which served the interests of justice, were apt to cause acute grief and trouble to a surprisingly wide circle of unexpected people. And here were depths utterly beyond his fathoming.

Who was to say what uglier things still might come to light if they were plumbed?

For Clover Willoughby's sake, and for the sake of a man whom he had known and liked, though it had only been for a short while, he would hold his tongue; unless he were forced to speak as he had so nearly been forced to speak this morning.

CHAPTER XVI

THE respectable old firm of London lawyers which had always managed the Karslake affairs sent their senior partner to represent them at their late client's funeral.

He was the only mourner from the outside world, though all the neighbourhood had mustered to pay the last courtesy to a man who had flashed for so brief a space across the horizon of their pleasant, conventional neighbourhood, an arresting and picturesque figure.

The tragic and mysterious circumstances of his death attracted a crowd of merely morbid sightseers to the churchyard; but the announcement of the funeral, inserted in the daily papers brought no single relative to swell the ranks of the mourners.

The lawyer himself didn't know of any, nor did he know of any enemy whom his client had possessed, or of any reason for his habit of carrying an automatic about with him. His acquaintance with the dead man had dated only from a couple of years ago, when he had advertised for him at old Robert Karslake's request.

Clover Willoughby and her aunt were at the funeral. The girl was as white as a ghost; her great blue eyes looked as though the tears they had shed had scalded all life, even all vision, from them. They never shifted their piteous gaze from that flower-strewn coffin.

Bevis Aylmer, some little way off, stared in front of him, acutely conscious of her presence; but oddly enough it was no longer as the woman desired that she made her presence felt; it was merely as someone for whom his heart ached with pity and with unavailing remorse for

having supplied the cloud to those brief silver days of happiness which had preceded the tragedy.

"Tell Clover that I would have given my right hand to have saved her from all that has happened," he had said to Letitia Cunliffe; and Clover's message in return had brought a certain amount of balm to his bruised spirit. Her loss was too shattering a thing for there to be any room in her mind to bear malice on the score of that antagonism which had only been caused by a very human jealousy.

"Please tell him," she had said, "that I believe it."

Major Fairlie was one of the dead man's few neighbours who wasn't at the funeral. A touch of his old enemy, malaria, had kept him at home.

"Pity you can't be there," Lindham had said with a heavy sigh at the prospect of the mournful ceremony in the little village church, the slow, dreary procession to the huge, ornate family vault in the churchyard outside. "You were really more intimate with the poor fellow than any of us."

"That's true," Fairlie said, "as far as it goes. And," he added thoughtfully, "I've only just begun to realize what a short way that was."

When the funeral was over, Danesthorpe Hall was shut up temporarily. Karslake had left no will.

As far as anyone could say, Nicholas Storrington was the next of kin; the dead man had himself declared that he had no nearer relation. But the matter could not be settled without the usual interminable processes of the law, which drag on for months. Possible next-of-kin had to be advertised for both in the English and foreign papers; inquiries made, much swearing of affidavits. Meanwhile the courts administered the estate and the servants were dismissed. Karslake's hunters were sold,

and the head gardener and his wife were installed as caretakers in the big empty house.

At the Firs, Clover led a more or less isolated life, nursing her grief and going for long, solitary walks with Castor, whom Nick had brought over to her at her special request. She had a way with dogs, and after a week's wistful bewilderment and patient waiting for his master and Pollux, Castor settled down and transferred his devotion to his new owner, and his dignified toleration to Letitia Cunliffe and the maids.

Nick was the only person whom Clover cared to see, since there was always a chance that he might bring her news that the police had found some clue, and the sole hope that life held out to her was to see her lover avenged.

Letitia Cunliffe, too, welcomed Nick's visits. It was a blessing, she thought, that the child should find some outlet other than those long, solitary walks, from which she returned physically and mentally worn out, to sit for hours by the fire with Castor's great, heavy head on her knee, gazing sombrely into the flames, while her light hand mechanically caressed the dog's ears.

So Storrington motored over to the Firs as often as he found an excuse, though the news that he brought was always disappointing.

The case remained a mystery; even with regard to how the murderer had got into the house—whether Karslake had admitted him, or whether he had broken in. Whoever he was, he had apparently vanished as mysteriously as he had come. The foreign-looking man whom the maid at the Firs had seen the day before, had been tracked to a workhouse fifty miles away and had accounted for himself. He turned out to be a gypsy who had fallen ill just before the hopping season was over and had been left behind by his clan, to follow them when he recovered.

He proved a satisfactory alibi for himself on the night of the murder, and no recent scar could be found on him, such as Juan Karslake's assailant should have carried away as a legacy from that sharp African knife.

Fairlie and Lindham dropped in for tea at the Dower House on the afternoon when Inspector Benshaw had brought this information. After the funeral Fairlie had asked the lawyer if there was any objection to his still making use of the Hall library as its late owner had allowed him to do; and having obtained permission, he came and went at intervals in that ill-omened room, absorbed in his books of reference, and unaffected, it would appear, by its recent tragic history.

To-day he had met Lindham outside the lodge gates, and they had walked to the Dower House, where they found Inspector Benshaw having tea with Storrington.

"I believe you think that you'll discover something up at the Hall yet, Major," the Inspector told Fairlie; and added grimly, "If there's any truth in the theory that a murderer always returns to the scene of his crime, you're standing some risk, particularly if that murderer happens to be a madman."

"I'll chance it," the other said, as he stretched his long thin legs before the fire in Storrington's smoking-room and held his lean chilled fingers to the welcome blaze. "And I don't agree with you that it was a madman. I've always told you that. Lunatics don't get away with it as neatly as in this case."

"Away with what, Major?" Benshaw drank noisily from his thin china tea-cup.

"That's what I'd like to know," Lindham said. "As far as we know, he got away with nothing."

"Figure of speech," returned the other laconically.

"Well, there was no sense in it, to my thinking," Benshaw said; "and that's why I say the fellow that did it

was touched in the upper story. Months hence, perhaps, his corpse will turn up in some out-of-the-way spot, although goodness knows we've searched all the lonely barns and outhouses, and the woods too. But turn up it will, mark my words. If you ask me what he got away with, Major, I'd say he got away with a pretty nasty slash from the foreign knife we found; and if you ask where he's got to, I'll lay any money that it's just far enough to creep in to some hole and die, same as any other madman would do."

Captain Lindham shook his head.

"There's method in some madnesses," he said. "It strikes me that poor Karslake knew what he had to look out for, if no one else did. Remember that yarn Lady Angela was giving us one day at the Manor, Nick, about his interviewing all his servants personally?"

"What was that?" Benshaw pricked his ears.

Lindham repeated the story, and the Inspector looked half incredulous. He flattered himself that he knew the ways of the gentry well enough to realize the peculiarity of this piece of gossip.

"Her ladyship was having a bit of a joke," he suggested now.

"Not she!" Lindham said. "The thing wasn't said by way of a joke. By Jove . . ." he slapped his knee. "I remember exactly what led up to it, now I come to think of it. It was that new stable-hand of yours, Nick," he turned to Storrington. "Lady Angela said that anyone who engaged a servant out of the road, so to speak, without a reference, deserved to have his throat cut."

"I remember," his host said. "But the fellow turned out uncommon well, Skipper, all the same. *Over*-conscientious in his work, if anything. He gave me notice because of some trouble with Martin in which he felt that he'd been to blame. Brooded over it."

"Oh, he's gone, has he?" The Skipper was always interested in little details about his friends' households. "When did he go?"

Storrington knitted his brows as he searched his memory, humouring his old friend's inquisitiveness.

"When was it that Albert left, Mrs. Martin?" he appealed to his housekeeper, who had entered in answer to his ring for fresh tea. "Just after the theatricals, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir; two days after. And a great pity 'twas, to my thinking. This new lad, he's willing, but he don't get through the work not so fast nor so well. I'm not one to crack up a foreigner against my own folk, but there's no getting away from it, they're good workers."

"Oh, a foreigner, was he?" Lindham asked in surprise as she departed. "I'd no idea of that. What nationality, eh?"

"Belgian," Storrington said. "A war refugee who stayed on. Hand on the muffins, Skipper, will you?"

Benshaw broke in here. He had been listening attentively. Now he straightened himself in his chair. The comfortable relaxation of the official off duty suddenly left him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Storrington," he said, "but it's the first I've heard of this fellow. You'll remember that I asked you for a list of everyone who lived inside the park boundaries, just by way of precaution, mind you, and not that there was any ground for suspecting any of them. But if this man was in your employ on the night of the murder——"

"He wasn't," Nick said. "Now I come to think of it, that was the very day he left—the eighth of February. Martin, my old groom, drove him to the station in the morning, and saw him into the ten-thirty train for Hull.

He was going to a compatriot there who was getting him a job."

"Is that a non-stop train?" Fairlie asked thoughtfully. The gist of his question was obvious; his host turned on him with an amused laugh of protest.

"You old sleuth!" he said. "But there's nothing doing there for either of you. Poor Albert wouldn't have hurt a fly for one thing; for another, his being here at all was the sheerest accident. He got knocked down by a motor van outside my gates, and was pretty badly hurt. You can ask Richards; he bound the poor devil up. And furthermore, though I can't tell you whether the ten-thirty goes straight through to Hull without stopping, I *can* tell you that Albert telephoned me up that night *from* Hull—between ten and half-past, I should say it was—and told me he'd found his pal and was sending me back some money I'd lent him to keep him going in case he couldn't find the feller."

Benshaw sat back with a little grunt of dissatisfaction. "That gives him an alibi, all right," he said. He put down his tea-cup gloomily and rose to go. "Most puzzling case I was ever on," he said.

CHAPTER XVII

Sir Charles Haile had left Chorton Ferrars before the murder, and it took him some time to make up his mind to speak. If the police stumbled on a clue without his help, so much the better. But as time went on and no clue was even hinted at in the papers, he invited himself down to Chorton Ferrars again and put the case before Lord Belford, who thereupon sent over a note asking Nick Storrington to lunch.

Not a word as to the matter in hand was spoken during that lunch, at which Lady Belford exerted herself to be at her most charming. Nicholas Storrington was the last person in the world whom one would ever associate with the kind of thing into which his cousin's death had plunged him, and she felt terribly sorry for him, as, after lunch, she removed herself and Elizabeth—Elizabeth very subdued to-day, her gay pertness sobered, her red head full of wonderings and compassions. The shadow of the Danesthorpe tragedy had made a deep impression upon her; it was the first time she had realized that even the most fortunately placed people were not immune from those crude dramas of life that were generally to be found among the very poor, the very bohemian, or—even more remote—the lower middle-classes.

Left alone with his two guests, Lord Belford introduced the subject without further delay, then left it to Sir Charles to continue. The latter addressed himself entirely to Nick.

"You'll remember," he said in a level, expressionless voice, "that I recognized your cousin on that evening when

you and I were watching the theatricals at the Manor?"

Nick nodded.

"I remember," he said. His face was as expressionless as the other man's voice. If he was inwardly dreading what Haile might have to tell him, he showed no signs of it.

"I asked you then not to mention the fact that Karslake and I had met before," Sir Charles went on. "I imagine you must have thought that rather an odd request to make?"

"I did," Storrington said frankly. "But it wasn't my business."

"Exactly. And it wasn't mine, then, to say what I knew. The situation is altered now."

He paused a moment, polished his eye-glass thoughtfully with his pocket-handkerchief, swung it meditatively on its ribbon, and continued:

"What I've got to tell you is a very difficult thing to say, and I'll put it as shortly as I can. My only reason for telling you is that it may help the police to trace the murderer. I understand they are inclined to suspect either a homicidal maniac, or someone in the neighbourhood who bore your cousin a personal grudge. But you may take it from me that the murderer was a foreigner—a Spaniard almost certainly—and a member of a secret society to which your cousin once belonged. I'm afraid it's no use mincing matters, Storrington. This society was ostensibly a political affair; to a certain extent a gambling circle; but—*au fond*—nothing more nor less than the foulest band of blackmailers and assassins that has ever been known to exist."

Sir Charles had apparently got behind his hearer's guard. Storrington's hand was clenched tightly as it lay on the leather arm of his chair; the knuckles showed dead white.

"Eight years ago, this gang had their headquarters in Madrid. They took for their motto the two Latin words 'Pollice verso.' . . . Thumbs down . . . the old order for death in the Roman Arena; and the signature of their executive council was the scarlet imprint of two thumbs. For treachery or disobedience to the Council there was only one punishment—death."

He paused again, as though giving Storrington time to recover his self-possession. Lord Belford intervened in carefully casual tones.

"There's always an element of theatricality in these affairs," he said, "which makes part of their appeal to the Latin races. And they're generally run by a few superior brains who exploit them for their own ends, and know the value of that stagey element. The side-line in gambling, too, is an additional lure."

"That's no doubt what attracted Karslake," Sir Charles said quickly. "I've no actual proof that he was connected with the darker side of the business. He was very young, wild, unhappily married . . ."

"Married?"

Storrington straightened up like an automaton released by a spring.

"Married to his cousin," Sir Charles said. "They were both absurdly young according to English ideas; but she was pure Spaniard, and he had Spanish blood in his veins. A Spanish boy of twenty-two—that was his age when he married—is immeasurably older than an English one of the same age. She was a handsome girl, if you happened to admire that type; dark as himself and a typical Astolar, as he was. It's a dominant type apparently; comes out in every family they marry into. The two might have been brother and sister as far as looks went. He married her straight from her convent school, and the marriage was a tragedy in itself if you

were to believe what you heard. *Her* friends said that he tired of her almost at once, and was the cruellest of brutes to her; *his* friends swore that she led him a dog's life. Though for that matter—" Sir Charles permitted himself a cynical smile—"her dogs took easily first place in that *ménage,* from all accounts. She was the sort of picturesque beauty who carries a pekinese or a toy pom everywhere with her as part of the picture. She'd sit for hours playing with the little beasts. All I know is that it was about as ill-assorted a union as you could find anywhere, and everyone agreed that young Karslake was going straight to the devil. You've got to remember that he had that wild Astolar blood in his veins, and the Astolars have always had the reputation of being fiery lovers and deadly haters, the kind that go to the devil whole-heartedly, with the élan of a tremendous vitality and strong passions. Then quite suddenly the climax came. They separated, and he left Madrid almost immediately after, and dropped out of everything like a stone disappearing from the surface of a pond. I never knew what became of him till I saw him here at Danesthorpe. It was pretty well known, though, that the police were searching for him. It seemed that this gang he belonged to had been raided by the authorities and broken up; and though some of them got away like Karslake, most of the leading lights were collared and tried for their various crimes. It made a terrible scandal at the time, and startling things came out at the trials. There were actually several men in quite high positions involved. At the present time the remnant of this Society is still supposed to exist somewhere in Spain: and personally I think that the murder of your cousin proves it. Not a doubt, I should say, but that he and one of his old associates had a private feud of their own, and the other fellow settled a long standing account that night in the library at

Danesthorpe Hall. If you want to find the murderer, you'll have to comb the registers of the aliens who've recently arrived in England, or the doubtful characters in London's foreign quarters and the big seaport towns: any of those places where we so kindly house the scum of other people's countries for them."

"On the other hand," Lord Belford added, "if you feel, my dear boy, that the chance of avenging your cousin's murder isn't worth the mud which might be stirred up at the murderer's trial, you may rest perfectly assured that Haile, my wife and myself are the only people who know these facts, and that no one else will ever know them; eh, Haile?"

"Certainly you may." The other man hastened to add his reassurance. "That was another of my reasons for speaking. I thought that you should know exactly what might be entailed by tracking the murderer down."

"Thanks; it was uncommonly good of you," Storrington said a little wanly. "I'll own it's a bit of a shock. Of course," he hesitated—"I guessed there was something queer about my poor cousin; but this . . . !"

He was silent a moment. "It's pretty ghastly," he said at last. He rose restlessly from his chair and stood facing the two older men, his hands in his pockets, his blue eyes bleak and concentrated, his pleasant cynical mouth set in sombre lines. "It seems that we don't even know whether he was still married or not; and, as I expect Belford has told you"—he spoke directly to Haile—"he had actually just become engaged to one of the girls who was acting with him that night."

"Yes, I heard," Sir Charles said sympathetically. "That is to say, I read about it in the paper at the same time as I read the account of the murder."

Storrington stared, unseeing, at the rug beneath his feet, mentally weighing the news he had just received,

making up his mind. . . . Suddenly he looked up, his jaw set resolutely.

"That settles it," he said quietly. "A man would need to be the most cold-blooded of skunks, to let poor little Clover Willoughby run the risk of finding out any of the things you've told me just now. If you'd either of you seen her as I've seen her lately, absolutely broken-hearted—the best half of her, as it were, buried in that fellow's grave—you couldn't face it either. Benshaw will have to get on with the case as best he can; he'll get no help from me. And that's that."

He squared his shoulders as though shouldering the responsibility; and Lord Belford breathed a faint sigh of relief. Both he and his wife had rather hoped that Nick might take it that way. What was the use of avenging the dead, only to blacken his memory?

Though after all, as he pointed out again, there was no proof whatever that Karslake had been anything but foolish—no proof that he *knew*, until the crash came, what kind of people these associates of his really had been.

Storrington shook his head.

"It's very kind and tactful of you to put it like that," he said wryly; "but if there had been nothing against him but sheer foolishness, why should he have thought it necessary to disappear? No; the more I think of it, the more I feel inclined to hold you both to your kind offer of silence. For Clover's sake alone it seems the only thing to do."

But at the bottom of his heart he knew that it wasn't only Clover's feelings, or even the family name, of which he was thinking. It was himself and his own relations with Clover which weighed with him most particularly. If Clover were ever to learn these shattering facts about the man whom she had loved and whose memory meant so much to her, the last thing which would advance his

own cause was that she should hear them from him. Later on, the knowledge might supply just the touch that was needed to wean her from her useless grief for Karslake; but Nick would rather that the bracing thrust was administered by someone else.

At present, his sympathy was a thing she clung to, and he was wise enough to know that it is often a short and sudden step in a woman's affections from the person she confides *about* to the person she confides *in*.

For the rest, as he motored home that afternoon, the bare possibility of Juan Karslake's widow turning up as his next of kin certainly remained to haunt him. But Karslake had been genuinely in love with Clover; there was no doubt about it. He would hardly have been blackguard enough to drag her into a bigamous marriage. No; one might take it for granted that his wife was dead.

He told himself that he was a fool to worry; yet Sir Charles Haile's story *did* worry him, and sooner than face a lonely tea in his present frame of mind, he drove on to the Manor and had tea with the Aylmers.

Yet even here he found unwelcome reminders of things that he wanted to forget.

Tea had just begun when he arrived, and Choo was sitting up greedily, his dark, bulging eyes on the cake-stand, which Mrs. Mordaunt was raiding for his benefit. What was it that Bevis had one day told him about Karslake's odd behavior with regard to Choo? It was explained now.

Karslake, in the days when he had been passionately in love with his beautiful wife, had probably been hotly jealous, as such a man would be, of even her pets. Afterwards, when he grew to hate her, he would have included the little pampered animals in his hatred.

According to Sir Charles Haile, the fires of a burning capacity for hate and love had been extinguished under

the heavy stone slab of the Karslake vault, on that cold afternoon when Juan Karslake had been buried. For love, for hate, for vengeance . . . was it possible that these three greatest of human emotions could be quite blotted out? That they would never filter through the crevices of the imprisoning vault and reach out towards their objects?

Nicholas Storrington shivered involuntarily.

"A goose walked over your grave, Nick," Ruth lightly quoted the old saying.

He stared at her rather blankly. It was odd, damnably odd, that she should have mentioned the word "grave."

CHAPTER XVIII

It was on a morning early in May that the Skipper came down to breakfast, with the freshness of spring making itself felt in his seasoned veins, and sitting down, unfolded his napkin and looked out over the hissing tea-urn and beyond his well-filled toast rack and eggstand, to an outside world which had almost shaken itself free from its winter sleep.

A froth of fruit blossoms shone white against the blue sky, the trees at the bottom of his little lawn were freshly green. For the first time the Skipper felt that the bleak burden of the last few months was really beginning to shift a little. Clover had played golf with Nick Storrington last week, her first game since the tragedy. Soon it was to be hoped that she would take up her normal life again, poor child.

He shook out his napkin and laid it across his knees, where, as the years went on, it showed an ever increasing tendency to slip from the lessening accommodation that was afforded it. He picked up the letters that lay beside his *Morning Post,* and opened the first. It was a begging letter for a charity in which he wasn't interested. He tossed it aside and opened the second. This bore the London postmark, and was from Storrington, whom he knew to have gone up to London to see Caldecott on business connected with the estate.

Outside the open windows the birds were singing enthusiastically. Inside the room only the crackling of that bombshell of a letter shared the silence with the bubbling of the water in the urn above the silver spirit lamp.

Then Lindham, the veins standing out on his flushed forehead, suddenly smote the table with his clenched fist until his cup and spoon rattled in the saucer.

"The damned skunk!" he gasped. "Oh, my God! the infernal hound!"

But it wasn't Nicholas Storrington whom he was apostrophizing. It was the news in Nick's letter which, as he put it afterwards, had "knocked him endways."

For a claimant to the Danesthorpe Estates had turned up; turned up with undeniable bona-fides and a will made entirely in her favour; Inez Isabella Karslake—*the murdered man's widow.*

It was some time before the Skipper could get beyond that first bald announcement and read the rest of the letter.

The claimant, it seemed, had been living in America for some years, but had lately returned to Europe and was travelling on the Continent when she had seen Caldecott's advertisement. She had not been on good terms with her late husband. They had parted two years after their marriage, and in consequence she knew nothing about his life for the last eight years, and had no light to throw on the cause of his murder.

All this the Skipper gathered from Nick's hastily written letter. And the burden of it all was—typical, he thought, of Nick in his sinking of his own interests in thought for his friends,—"For Heaven's sake get hold of Clover and break it to her before she sees it in the papers!"

The police, it seemed, had already interviewed the widow, and the devil only knew when the newspaper men would be on her track or what she would say to them. Nick himself hadn't seen her yet, but Caldecott had described her as emotional and stormy, the kind of woman who revels in a scene. . . .

The Skipper laid down the letter, literally seething with outraged wrath and horror. Surely no man had ever been more justified of his prejudice against a fellowman! The Dago had brought discord into the neighbourhood from first to last; and even with his passing out of it his power for mischief had not ended. He had left behind him a legacy of the bitterest humiliation for the girl who was the apple of the old sailor's eye.

Lady Angela Vyse was in her garden when the Skipper drove by after breakfast wrapped in portentous gloom, loathing the errand on which he was bound, glad of any excuse that offered itself for delay, and of any opportunity to unburden his mind to someone who would share his outraged wrath without being stricken to the very soul, as poor Clover would be.

He pulled up and descended, and half an hour later Angela burst in breathlessly upon Mrs. Aylmer and Ruth with the news.

It made all the sensation that she could have expected.

"Bigamy!" Mrs. Aylmer froze as it were into a statue of horrified disgust. "It sounds *impossible!* . . . My dear, how perfectly ghastly!"

Ruth stared from one to the other of her companions with an incredulous dismay that almost bereft her of speech. Presently she found it—with difficulty.

"Bigamy!" she repeated slowly. "But . . . it's so . . . so horribly *crude,* somehow!"

Crude. Yes, you might call it a good many other things; but above all things, it was just that! Crude—inartistic, violent, shocking. That one word stood for them all.

"That *absolutely* describes it," Lady Angela said emphatically. "And you know," she frowned perplexedly—"he *wasn't* crude; not in himself. That's the amazing part

of it. It's the last *possible* description one could have applied to him."

But Mrs. Aylmer, flushed and agitated, could see no distinction between a perfectly horrible state of affairs and the man who was responsible for it. This splitting of hairs was beyond her.

"There's only *one* description of the man," she pronounced vehemently. "He must have been an utter scoundrel! And to think that he's been to this house and that we've all treated him as a friend! Why, it was probably here, in my drawing-room that poor Clover began to fall in love with him—oh! it simply doesn't bear thinking of."

"What doesn't bear thinking of?"

Bevis Aylmer loomed in the doorway, and Lady Angela at sight of him, rose precipitously.

By her own act, she had changed the whole face of the situation as between herself and Bevis. She was no longer the huntress, brazen and persistent. The recent turn which the affair had taken, surprised and maddened her by the irony and the seeming irrevocability of it. She had got Bevis to the pitch of proposing, and she couldn't accept him. Her pride, which had slumbered so long, had leapt into indignant life at the idea of being whitewashed in his eyes and her own by an act of conventional chivalry. So, tortured by the self-scorn of the woman who has given all . . . for nothing, she avoided him when she could.

Ruth protested.

"Oh, don't go yet. Bevis, the most awful thing has happened. Tell him, Angela!"

Angela half-unwillingly resumed her seat and repeated her story. Her desire to see how Bevis took the news warred with her reluctance to stay; for she knew that

his shocked anger, however justified, would touch her on the raw.

Yet it was perfectly right and natural, of course, that he should be horrified and furious. Who that had any humanity in them wouldn't ache for poor Clover Willoughby at the present moment?

Bevis, however, after the first shock, was unexpectedly restrained in his comments. He didn't even, as he would once have done, break out in a violent tirade against everyone who had refused to accept the view about Juan Karslake which he himself had always advocated. That ghastly morning when he had, to all intents and purposes, stood up before his closest friends, tacitly accused of an unprovoked murder, was still fresh in his memory, and this new calamity was in itself too shattering a thing to rave about.

Aylmer's feelings not only towards the dead man but to most of his little world, had undergone such bewildering changes in the last months that he groped in a kind of mental darkness, a numbed stupor through which throbbed a perpetual restless pain. Juan Karslake, whatever he had or hadn't been, was dead; what was the use of inveighing futilely against a dead man?

Both his mother and Ruth apparently expected him to; in fact Mrs. Aylmer seemed a little bewildered, almost disappointed by the restraint of his comments, and Angela was watching him curiously. What did they want him to say or do? This previous marriage of Juan Karslake's was an accomplished fact; nothing that anyone could say would alter it. What the hell did Angela, in particular, want? One would have said that she actually resented the fact that he had ceased to play the openly disconsolate lover for Clover Willoughby's sake. Yet, from Aylmer's full-blooded male point of view, it would have been as incongruous to be in love with Clover now,

after all that had happened, as with a passionless nun driven to conventual vows by some great bereavement. Even now that she had begun again to take up her old life and her old friends, she wasn't the Clover he had known—the Clover who had once made his pulses beat at her very proximity.

Last week he had met her playing golf with Nick Storrington, and the full revelation of his change of feeling towards her had startled him almost as much as the change in the girl herself.

She hadn't lost her looks or her health; her youth and splendid constitution had saved her that; but she had lost a good deal else—the sweetness which had softened her breezy vitality, her old radiant joy in life. She was spiritually the ghost of what she had been, a restless, hardened ghost. . . .

Her one-time persistent adorer knew at last what he had recently begun to suspect, that all he had to offer her now was a remorseful brotherly fondness.

Thank God at least that things hadn't been worse with her. She hadn't been actually married to Karslake; the scandal and insult of the whole thing entailed no sense of personal degradation. . . . She wasn't, as she might have been, had a murderer's bullet not intervened, the scoundrel's bereaved mistress. . . . Ah, that got him on the raw! No question of anything but "seeing red" where that idea was concerned! Angela, watching him, noted that his big muscular hand clenched suddenly, and his heavy jaw stiffened and set itself like rock.

A constrained silence descended upon the four people in the Manor drawing-room. But the everyday world doesn't disintegrate because a moral bombshell has exploded. The parlour-maid came in with a message for Mrs. Aylmer; one of the villagers had come to ask her help in some domestic matter. In the distance Choo, who

had escaped on to the lawn through the open window, could be heard yapping shrilly.

"Well!" Ruth heaved a deep sigh. "I must go and retrieve Choo. The last time he played himself exhausted with Bones he had hysterics. Wait for me, Angela. I'm walking down into the village as soon as I've brushed him." She was gone.

Bevis, standing by the fireplace, where a bright fire dispersed the fresh chilliness of the morning, never moved. Lady Angela, sitting in a low chair beside it, rose for the second time, intending to follow Ruth. The sight of her on the point of rapid flight, as he seemed always fated to see her nowadays, stung Bevis into sudden speech.

"You needn't bolt like that," he said. "Being in the same room with me for five minutes won't kill you."

"I—I thought that you'd be busy," she stammered hastily; then furious with herself for her confusion, she turned to the gilt framed mirror above the mantelpiece and surveyed her reflection with ostentatious criticism. He was glowering at her, and she felt herself growing scarlet under her powder. With a still more ostentatiously *dégagé* air, she opened her little gold vanity case, produced a lip-stick, and proceeded carefully to touch up her lips.

"I should think," she remarked, "that this business will kill all sentiment for Juan Karslake's memory on Clover's part."

"It's to be hoped so for her own sake," the young man agreed sombrely.

"And for yours." Swift as a flash she rounded off his sentence.

He made a sudden restless movement.

"No," he said in a low emphatic voice. "Not for mine. That's all over. There never was anything in it for either of us. Clover was wiser than I."

Lady Angela was stung by what seemed to her his tone of lingering regret into reckless bitterness.

"Clover," she mocked, "is still, I notice, everything that is admirable. Discreet and . . . virtuous, and——"

"Stop that!" he said roughly. "My God! you know how to make a fellow feel the most unspeakable hound, don't you?"

His newly learnt humility and endurance had suddenly given way. After all, she *was* responsible, in the first instance, for the chain of events that had led to the disastrous climax of that February night at the White Cottage. It was she who had started the flirtation that had progressed from light love-making into that final scene of uncontrolled passion. One imagined that she had intended to evoke some response from him when she had openly and deliberately led him on; so why should she refuse to accept the fact that she had more than gained her end? or why make a grievance of it? Damn it all, if she had changed her mind and decided that he didn't interest or amuse her any longer, she might have the honesty to say so, instead of avoiding the issue altogether!

His bitter self-reproach on the score of that night at her cottage had gradually merged into a savage, helpless irritation at the sheer perversity of her. It was himself that he had wanted to kick in the first instance; lately he had felt, mingled with his hungry longing to hold her in his arms once more and kiss her, an ever-increasing and primitive desire to put the tantalizing little wretch across his knee and spank her soundly.

"I tell you, I've had enough of it," he said, between his teeth. "Let's have some plain speaking for once. You threw yourself at my head that night, and I was cad enough to take what you offered."

"Oh—h! you *brute!*" Angela gave a little gasp of outraged indignation. It was one thing to accept the entire

blame, to invest herself involuntarily with the *rôle* of supreme sinner, but quite another to have her self-denunciation so bluntly supported. "What a perfectly *horrible* thing to say!" she exclaimed hotly.

"Well, you've admitted it, haven't you?" he asked sullenly. "And you can call me a brute as much as you like. I deserve anything you can say to me for that matter. I can understand *that* all right: what I'm damned if I can understand is what you've been driving at lately, and I tell you I'm not going to stand for any more of it! You never give me a chance of speaking to you——"

"I never imagined you wanted to," she cut in swiftly.

"That's a lie," he retorted with scant politeness. Both their tempers were well on edge by now, and the fact that each was miserably in love with the other didn't mend matters. "If you hadn't known that I wanted to speak to you, why have you avoided me on every possible occasion?"

"Perhaps because I didn't expect to find you particularly amusing," she suggested, recklessly taking the offensive.

"Thank you." He reddened furiously in his turn. "Then it's either that you can't forgive me for behaving as I did that night, or that you've had all the amusement you wanted out of me, and that you're bored? Am I to take one of these for my answer?"

"Oh, I don't know what you're making all this fuss about," she cried in nervous exasperation. In another moment she would break down and cry—make an utter fool of herself! Why couldn't he leave things alone? Men were such idiots! His conscience was worrying him, she supposed; he wanted to "do the right thing," his type of man always wanted to do what they called "the decent thing." As if any modern woman's self-respect was ever restored by anything so cold-blooded and

perfunctory! She would begin to cry in a minute—she knew it. Her eyelids were wet already. Those wrathful brown eyes were more than she could face, and she turned aside once more to the mirror and mechanically, with fingers that shook, again applied lipstick and powder puff, while Bevis watched her in silence. The elaborate but shaky work she was putting in was certainly not an artistic success.

"When you've done making a mess of your face," he said at last brutally, "perhaps you'll tell me why, after you went out of your way to make me think you liked me"—oh, undoubtedly chivalry had gone to the winds!—"you should turn round and treat me like dirt now that you've done your work and made me care for you so . . . so *damnably!*" he finished in a lower, altogether less truculent tone.

It was an illuminating tone. She turned round slowly and faced him, her green eyes searching his desperately. There were tears on her eyelashes, they blurred her vision. She shook them off and rubbed them away with her knuckles in a childlike gesture of abandon that left long black smudges on her cheeks.

"You—you're only saying that because you think you ought to!" she whispered.

"Good God!"

Bevis stared at her; the truth was dawning on him at last.

On the day of the inquest, he had wanted to do just that thing of which she accused him now, but a warning instinct had come to his rescue then and checked him. Since then, as the days went by, this new elusive Angela had grown to hold such a prominent place in his thoughts, that when he at last realized what was happening, his previous half-formed intention of proposing to her as a duty had almost passed from his memory. It had seemed

to him that she *must* know as well as he, that he was in love with her; it had never entered his head that she could misunderstand. Yet here she was, bereft for once of all her affectations and artificialities, blurting out that piteous accusation—a veritable heart's-cry. . . .

He drew a long breath.

"It's *that,* is it? You darling little fool!" He caught her in his arms, scattering the contents of the vanity case over the carpet in the shock of that sudden, violent onslaught, and proceeded with rapturous enthusiasm to complete the mess which shaky lipstick and tears had already made of the face that was lifted—radiant and besmudged—to his.

So on that May morning, Fate, dealing out gifts with one hand and curses with the other, showered the "scent of the Eden Rose" over two people, and scattered dust and ashes on the head of a third.

CHAPTER XIX

Clover Willoughby had fancied when she had stood outside the Karslake vault in Danesthorpe churchyard on a never-to-be-forgotten winter's day, that there was nothing on earth left for her to suffer. But after that fresh May morning on which Captain Lindham motored over to the Firs, she knew that she had been terribly wrong.

It seemed that one might be asked to stand with bowed head at many open graves before one's life was over; and the saddest of all were the graves of shattered illusions.

She wouldn't believe it at first, this awful news which he had brought her; her heart refused to accept it and her mind re-echoed Ruth Aylmer's stunned protest. It was all so hideously crude, so utterly out of keeping with her gallant, courteous lover.

It seemed impossible to believe that anyone so innately fastidious, capable of such delicate fancies, could have played such a low, treacherous part; or that a lover who wooed with such romantic reverence could have dreamt of dragging down anyone he loved in such a shameful fashion.

Back to her memory came some words of his, spoken on the evening of their engagement, in low passionate tones.

"If you knew what you mean to me, you beautiful English thing, with that unconscious pride of yours, as delicate and as pure as an early morning frost that waits for the sun to melt it . . ."

She could hear his voice still, see his eyes glowing darkly and softly as they held hers.

No—this nightmare was unbelievable. She flung it back at Lindham with swift vehement scorn.

The lawyers were fools—credulous fools! This woman was some clever impostor, of course! Mightn't they have expected that all their inquiries and advertisements would produce a claimant of that kind?

"My poor child," Lindham said sadly, "I'm afraid there's no possibility of that. Caldecott's not likely to have accepted her as he seems to have done without going into her *bona-fides* pretty thoroughly; and the woman seems to have been prepared for the strictest investigation. She's got copies of her marriage certificate, and a will made immediately after the marriage and left with the family lawyers at Madrid. What's more, a member of the Spanish Embassy in London himself brought her to Caldecott's office and vouched for her personally. He knew her family, it seems. Oh, she's established her case all right. They couldn't catch her out in anything. I wish to God there *were* some flaw in it . . . for yours and everybody's sake."

"I don't believe it," she muttered fiercely, her lips set in a hard line. "There *must* be some mistake. When Nick comes back he'll tell us that they've found out something more, that she isn't who she pretends to be, after all; or that it was some other Karslake whom she married. . . ."

She paced feverishly up and down the room, a raging whirlwind of desperate disbelief. The old sailor gave it up. He hadn't the heart to argue with her. He left her at last to Letitia Cunliffe, whose knowledge of the world made her easier to convince as to hard facts, but whose "damned sentimentality," as the Skipper put it, hesitated to admit them.

Nick Storrington returned home next day, and Clover's little two-seater was at the Dower House door half-an-hour after she had assured herself by telephone of his return.

He came out to meet her, and for a moment she didn't move from her seat at the wheel. She bent forward, tense and rigid, searching his face with her great brilliant eyes, beneath which lay the shadows of a sleepless night.

"It's not true, Nick?" she asked in a quick, breathless tone. "It's a lie, isn't it?"

"No, it's true enough," he said briefly and compassionately; and put out his hand to steady her as she descended blindly from the car, like a person in a dream, and followed him into the house.

There they faced each other with tragedy in the air between them.

"You've seen her?"

"The woman? Yes. But only for a moment or two. She was on the verge of hysterics." He made a gesture of bitter contempt. "There can't have been much love lost between them, after nearly eight years apart; but that's her type, of course—an emotional tornado in petticoats."

Clover twisted her hands tightly together.

"But it *can't* be true, Nick! it simply can't be," she whispered wretchedly. "How can the lawyers be so absolutely sure? They've had so little time . . ."

"It's nearly ten days now since she was brought to Caldecott by this Spanish feller. Old Caldecott put the matter at once into the hands of a reliable agency for that kind of thing, and spared no expense to rush investigations through. Every possibility has been taken into consideration; they even had the divorce records looked through here and in America, and in every country where people of their two nationalities could have got a divorce.

She's an R.C. of course, but he wasn't. Nothing doing, however. And the Embassy is prepared to vouch for her—that's pretty conclusive evidence, I'm afraid; oh, she's Mrs. Juan Karslake, all right."

Clover was silent, overwhelmed, beaten down as much by that bleak finality of her companion's tone as by the indisputable array of facts. Yet still she fought piteously against his obvious conviction.

"If Mr. Caldecott has known all that time, why didn't he tell you before?" she cried. "Doesn't that sound as if he had believed that she would turn out to be an impostor?"

"He did think so at first," he admitted. "Decent old fellow, Caldecott; I believe he was genuinely quite cut-up. He hoped, I gather, that she'd turn out to be someone who . . . who hadn't any legal claim . . ."

He had hesitated over the end of his sentence, but Clover caught him up in a hard, clear little voice.

"You mean, someone who'd been his mistress, as I should have been?" The savage instinct which makes a wild animal turn and rend itself was gripping her.

"Oh, my dear girl . . . don't!"

Involuntarily he made a step forward, then checked himself, standing with clenched hands, his eyes hungrily devouring her pale downbent face. Presently he spoke with a startling concentration of repressed rage.

"My God!" he said, "if that scoundrel were only alive at the present moment, so that I could tell him what he never gave me the opportunity of saying while he lived, curse him!"

"Nick!" She looked up, bewildered. That note of fierce hatred had pierced even through her stunned misery. "I thought you liked him . . ."

He laughed; it was the most utterly mirthless laugh she had ever heard.

"I think I hated him from the first," he said sombrely.

"But why?"

Even now that this hideous thing had happened, she couldn't understand how anyone—anyone who wasn't notoriously prejudiced or openly jealous like Bevis Aylmer, could bring himself to dislike the vital, charming personality that Juan Karslake had been . . . to *her*.

And then the thought of his cruel deception was driven in upon her again, and the conflict of her emotions showed itself plainly in her expressive face. Nick Storrington, watching her, made up his mind to take a step he had so far avoided.

"Because," he said quietly, "I suppose I guessed what none of the rest of you, except Lindham, seemed to have any suspicion of; and later . . . I *knew*."

"Knew what?" A fresh dread quickened her voice. "Tell me, Nick . . . tell me! I've got to hear everything, now that I've heard so much. *What* do you know?"

The slow deliberate voice never faltered as he answered her.

"That the man whom you all liked so much was—if not actually a criminal himself—an associate of the vilest criminals. That his life in Madrid, some years ago, was of the kind that women like you know nothing about; that he *had* been married (even if he were free now to marry again), and that in his previous marriage he had been a cruel and unfaithful husband——"

"Nickie!"

It was an anguished cry that faltered from her, stemming the flood of his revelations. "You *knew* . . . all these awful things? . . . and you never said a word?"

"I only knew after the man was dead," he defended himself gently. "That fellow who was staying with the Belfords—Sir Charles Haile—told me."

Baldly he gave her Haile's reasons for speaking, and his authority for what he had said. The possibly extenuating circumstances at which the latter had vaguely hinted, he left out; after all, one was dealing with facts, not possibilities. She listened to him as though in a trance.

"You *knew* . . ." she repeated in a dazed voice. "And you never told me!"

His silent gesture of self-exculpation, with all it implied, would have touched her at any other moment; for it seemed that Nick would have left her her memories unspoilt as long as he could. But now she scarcely grasped the inner meaning of his silence. She stood, her arm lying on the mantelpiece, her forehead resting on it, staring . . . staring into the fire with dry eyes that burnt and ached with the weight of tears behind them, and a brain that throbbed and circled and burnt also—like her eyes—like those little dancing flames.

He was asking her to believe that she had loved an utterly worthless evil thing, a beautiful mask for unspeakable vileness. . . .

She wouldn't believe it—she couldn't. A sudden breathless resolution took shape in her mind. Aunt Letty would quaver horrified protest, and Uncle Bill would bluster and exclaim; but they should not shake her decision. She would see for herself this woman whom they were telling her that Juan had loved—ah! that hurt horribly!—had loved and tired of, ill-treated and deserted. . . .

She would see her and speak to her. Then and then only, if needs be, she would believe.

In Clover Willoughby, both love and faith died hard.

CHAPTER XX

CLOVER's determination to meet the widow created consternation among her friends.

As if the Karslake murder hadn't been a sufficiently appalling thing in itself, they protested, without this fresh element of sordid melodrama into which it seemed to be sweeping the principal actors in the tragedy!

The subject cropped up on a night soon after Storrington's return from London. Lady Angela was dining at the Manor, and so was Captain Lindham.

"Has anyone heard whether this woman means to *live* here, at the Hall?" Mrs. Aylmer asked anxiously. "Because that would be really too ghastly."

The Skipper reassured her.

"No; she's going to sell it—lock, stock and barrel. It isn't her line of country at all, so Caldecott told Nick. He himself hasn't dealt much with her personally since their first interview, and he gave Nick to understand that he was thankful. He's been dealing with the lawyer whom the Spanish Embassy recommended to her. They advised her to employ her own solicitor in case there should be any unpleasantness on the part of the English branch of the Karslakes. My God, if old Robert Karslake could only see the infernal mess that damned will of his has made of everything!"

"I've been wondering"—it was Ruth who spoke—"whether this woman hates the very thought of Clover or whether she is sorry for her?"

"Can't say. They're going to meet, anyhow," the Skipper answered shortly.

"To *meet!* Clover and the widow? But, good gracious, they *can't!*" For once Angela Vyse was actually shocked. Her not too exacting sense of what was fitting was outraged. "It would be an *impossible* situation," she declared.

"That's what Nick and I have both told her," Lindham said in gloomy tones. "But she's made up her mind to it and nothing will move her. I'm hanged if I can see what she hopes to gain by it."

A silence fell round the dinner-table. Everyone was visualizing that projected meeting between the two women and there wasn't a mind that didn't recoil, blank and utterly baffled by the stupendousness of it.

"It's *tremendously* plucky of her," Lady Angela said at last, almost under her breath.

She was sitting next to Bevis, and instinctively, as she turned her head and their eyes met, her hand went out to his beneath the table. In contrast to her own happiness, the thought of Clover Willoughby's bleak desolation caught her by the throat.

Captain Lindham heaved a gusty sigh as he attacked his chicken fricassee with a lack of zest that was unusual in him.

"I passed her walking along the road yesterday afternoon," he said, "in that gale of wind and rain, and I don't believe she even saw me. She looked like a storm-driven ghost, poor child, legging it as though the foul fiend himself were behind her instead of that big brute of a dog padding along at her heels."

"Nick was here yesterday," Bevis said. "I thought he looked ill too, poor beggar." He—like most of Storrington's friends—was worried about Nick. Nick was overdoing it. Strenuously busy all day long—except when at the Firs—and sitting up late into the night over the estate accounts. He looked as though he were sleeping

badly; and Mrs. Martin frankly owned that never before had she known his smooth temper to be as ragged as it occasionally proved itself nowadays. "It's a bad business for Nick," Bevis went on. "The Dower House goes with the agency, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that's right," Lindham said; "and Nick stands every chance of having to turn out if the next owner has a pal of his own to give the job to. Oh, it's a bad show, altogether—a rotten show."

Two days later he repeated that assertion gloomily to himself as he sat opposite to Letitia Cunliffe and his late ward, in a first-class railway carriage, travelling Londonwards.

The Spanish woman had announced her intention of coming to Danesthorpe, to look through the dead man's personal effects; but no arguments had been effectual in persuading Clover to wait until the occasion of that visit. And perhaps it was as well, the Skipper told himself now.

He stole surreptitious glances over the top of his paper at the pale, set profile opposite to him—the blue eyes half-veiled by weary lids that stared out unseeing at the country slipping past them, fresh and green and smiling.

Better to get it over quickly, and then perhaps the child might allow herself to be taken away, abroad, anywhere for a change of scene, and be out of the way before Juan Karslake's widow came to the Hall, to flaunt her foreign elaboration of deep mourning, and to lay her conventional floral tributes on the coffin of a scoundrel.

An appointment had been made through Caldecott for Clover to see the woman to-day at her hotel; Miss Cunliffe was taking her there, and the Skipper was meeting them again at the station.

Clover had insisted that no one else should be present at their meeting; and Letitia Cunliffe dared not let herself think of that interview and of what might be said at it.

But for once, she and the Skipper clutched desperately at the same—the *only*—straw of consolation. Better perhaps the surgeon's knife, healing in its very cruelty, than the chronic ache.

Miss Cunliffe's nerves were keyed up to a pitch of numbed endurance. Not one of the anxious questions that hammered in her brain could find an answer—not even when she and Clover had entered the huge, pillared lounge with its soft carpets, its vistas of wide steps, its clusters of big palms under which belated luncheon parties were drinking their coffee and smoking. The widow's choice of a hotel provided no clue to her personality. She might have elected to stay in this most expensive of modern caravanserais either because its showy luxury appealed to her, or because she would be lost among a crowd here—less exposed to inquisitive curiosity. It was impossible to say which.

They were told at the bureau that Mrs. Karslake was out at the moment. To their conference with the suave attendant, suddenly appeared another even more suave official of superior standing.

"Mrs. Karslake," he said, "had been expecting two ladies." His shrewd eyes darted from Letitia Cunliffe to the girl beside her, whose proud exquisite little face bore such a curiously blanched and frozen air.

He knew all about the Karslake case—who didn't? This was *the* Miss Willoughby of whom not even the most enterprising of newspaper men had been able to obtain any photograph, except a last year's laughing snapshot taken by a local photographer at a hunt point-to-point, tragic in its contrast to this year's happenings.

He remembered that snapshot, but he wouldn't have recognized the girl from it.

"Would the ladies prefer," he asked, "to go upstairs and wait for Mrs. Karslake in her private suite?"

"No; we will wait here, thank you," Clover said quickly, and he piloted them to a distant settee under the palms, where they sat and waited.

From time to time, Miss Cunliffe surreptitiously consulted her watch; but Clover sat rigid and motionless, watching the revolving door.

"We were nearly half-an-hour too early," the older woman murmured. "It's not quite five minutes to three yet."

"Not quite five minutes," the girl repeated mechanically; and then in a low, tense voice, "Not five minutes to wait before I know . . . the things that I *must* know, unless—unless, I think, I am to go mad!"

"My dear . . ." Letitia put out a hand and touched hers very tenderly, "if I could only do this for you——"

"You can't, Aunt Letty darling"—the blue eyes lost their strained expression for a moment in a flash of quick gratitude. "You've been an angel to me, an absolute angel! but there are some things that no one can do for me but myself. This woman—I've got a feeling that there can't be anything but truth between her and me. It's too big a thing for anyone to lie about. From the moment we face each other I shall know . . . I shall know exactly what they meant to each other, she . . . and Juan."

Her voice broke off suddenly in a catch of the breath. She stared, voiceless, expectant, towards the entrance doors of the lounge.

Those gleaming doors, revolving endlessly, admitted a sable-clad figure who advanced swiftly up the lounge. A tall woman, holding herself superbly, and walking with that long graceful swing that is an Andalusian heritage. She was dressed in the deepest mourning and her clothes bore the expensive *cachet* which stamps the rich South American.

At this time of year, and in a place where so many

well-dressed women gathered, one wouldn't perhaps have expected her to attract so much attention; but all heads were turned in her direction as she passed. It seemed as though an emotional, dramatic personality made itself felt in those swift supple movements of hers, the tempestuous swing of her black silk cloak that billowed about her in the air of her passing and the floating black chiffon that veiled a haughty, tragic face, heavily powdered after the fashion of her countrywomen. It was a handsome face, with regular, strongly marked features; and sullen, passionate lips, vividly carmine, showed dimly through her veil.

She passed through the lounge, looking neither to right nor left, busied with the fastening of the suede bag in her gloved hands. Then, just at the entrance to the lift, one of the many uniformed officials intercepted her.

She paused with an imperious interrogative lift of her head; and as he spoke she turned and stared past him down the lounge towards Miss Cunliffe and Clover. Sphinx-like she stood there; then spoke a few words to the man who had stopped her, and swung round and disappeared into the lift. The man came across to them.

"Miss Willoughby?" he said interrogatively. Then as Clover rose, "If you will please to come this way, madam."

The girl caught her aunt's hand in a brief grip whose force was literally painful, before she followed her guide. Letitia, left behind, scarcely realized the bruising of her fingers as she clasped them in feverish suspense and waited.

She could not even conjecture what shape this interview might take, or what it might mean to the girl whom she loved like a daughter. The child hadn't shed a tear, as far as she knew, since Nick Storrington's news had come to Danesthorpe, and there had been moments when

the older woman had almost feared for the girl's reason. And now . . .

The issue was out of her hands. Letitia Cunliffe sat alone among the little groups of chattering pleasure-seekers, and prayed, as only a childless woman can pray for the child that another woman has borne to give her the joys of motherhood by proxy.

CHAPTER XXI

It was a long interview; and as the moments passed by Letitia began to get even more anxious. Was the woman having hysterics, as in Mr. Caldecott's office—making some terrific scene? The poor child would be frightened to death. . . .

Miss Cunliffe half rose; ought she to go and see what was happening? demand to be taken to Mrs. Karslake's private suite. . . .

She was actually on the point of going, when a voice fell on her ears. She looked up with a start to find that Clover had approached unheard over the soft carpet.

"Dear Aunt Letty, did you think I was never coming?"

It was Clover's voice, but not the voice to which poor Miss Cunliffe had of late grown sorrowfully accustomed. Not that hard, dreary, dead little voice that seemed to have had all the youth and happiness mangled out of it.

"Oh, my dear!"

Letitia caught at the girl with a gasp of relief, and Clover sank down on to the settee beside her, with a little shaky laugh. She was clearly overstrung and exhausted by her ordeal; but although her laugh had been a purely nervous one, still. . . . She hadn't laughed in *any* fashion for nearly four months. Miss Cunliffe could hardly believe her ears.

"It's . . . it's all right, Aunt Letty!" she said low and breathlessly. "It wasn't Juan's fault. He wasn't to blame; I ought never to have doubted him for one instant. He thought she was dead, *anyone* would have believed it

with the proofs that were given him! And for the rest——"

She broke off short. Aunt Letty didn't know, and no one should *ever* know the cruel lies which Nick Storrington had been told about Juan. They weren't true, thank God! they weren't true. Who should one believe if not the lips that had just convincingly spoken his acquittal of those vile charges?

"She told you that?" Miss Cunliffe asked eagerly. "She was . . . nice . . . to you?"

"She has told me . . . everything that I wanted to know," Clover said emphatically. "Everything. Oh, Aunt Letty, she has made me see things . . . utterly differently! I don't suppose I could make you understand —nobody could understand—what this has meant to me. Don't look at me, Aunt Letty dear!" She made a little gesture as though to shield her face from the other's searching eyes. "I'm a sight! I'm the most *abject* fool! I've been crying my eyes out . . . crying away, I think, all the tears that I couldn't cry till now . . ."

"Thank God!" Miss Cunliffe murmured fervently. She felt half-dazed. Of all the possibilities that had occurred to her, this had certainly been the last. It was a miracle beyond her to understand. The frozen shell which had wrapped the girl round against the sympathy of even her nearest and dearest, had apparently melted at the touch of this stranger's hand, and a curious, almost radiant kind of serenity gleamed in her softened, tear-wet eyes and hovered about the lips that were tremulously but firmly closed on the subject of what had passed between herself and Juan Karslake's widow.

"Thank God!" Miss Cunliffe murmured again.

An hour ago Clover would scarcely have noticed the fluttering sigh of relief that escaped from her and showed the strain under which she had been labouring. That sigh

would have awakened no echo against the wall of her numbed perceptions, wouldn't have penetrated the self-absorption which marks the griefs of most young things. An hour ago the traces which the past months had left on Letitia Cunliffe—of strain, of ageing anxiety, had escaped her. But this was the old Clover, so miraculously come back. As she returned Letitia's fond glance, she gave a little cry of dismay and concern.

"Oh, you poor dear!—you look worn out!" The strong young arm slipped about her in a warm embrace. In eyes and voice was the old adorable tenderness. "I've been horribly selfish, Aunt Letty! I've never thought of you —little beast that I am; and you've been so patient and good to me! Now you're not to talk or think about me any more to-day; I've been nuisance enough to you, you poor angel!"

Letitia Cunliffe's weary eyes filled with thankful tears. She was almost too overcome to speak.

It wasn't till they were once more in the train on their homeward way that Clover's two companions had their first opportunity to exchange a word in private.

They had tea at the station, and with commendable self-restraint the Skipper asked no questions; he restricted his activities to piling the girl's plate with cakes and sandwiches, and watching her eat some of them mechanically as though she were wrapt in a dream.

Once she protested.

"I shall be sick, Uncle Bill," she warned him with that unaccustomed faint laughter which had given Letitia such a shock.

"You had no lunch," he said firmly.

She put down her cup and gazed at him, still in the same curious, dreaming fashion.

"But that was *years* ago!" she said slowly; at which

startlingly inapt statement, spoken in all good faith, he stared at her, speechless.

When the train had started, she adopted without a murmur Miss Cunliffe's suggestion that she should put her feet up and rest. The long-fringed eyes closed almost at once; it wasn't five minutes before she was sound asleep.

"Well?" the Skipper asked impatiently. "For God's sake, tell me. What does it all mean? What happened?"

"I don't know!" Miss Cunliffe said helplessly. "I . . . simply . . . *don't* . . . know! She has hardly told me a thing. All that I can gather is that she seems quite sure now that Juan Karslake believed himself to be free when he proposed to her. I know nothing more except . . . what you can see for yourself."

She indicated the recumbent figure with an eloquent gesture. Even in her sleep the softened, restful expression on the girl's face was marked. Her flushed cheek rested on the palm of her hand, her breath came and went evenly. How many times had Letitia bent over her at night, her heart wrung by the restless, fevered tossings, the slim beseeching hands that groped in vacancy, the little muttered cries?

"Amazing!" The old sailor's expression was almost awed as his eyes followed hers.

"Of course," he added under his breath, "I can see that to have the fellow cleared of that charge must be a tremendous relief; but to make *such* a difference to her . . . ! Can *you* understand it?"

It wasn't often that he confessed himself obliged to demand assistance from his rival in Clover's affections; but after all, Letty Cunliffe was a woman too. She was bound to have more understanding of the workings of a girl's mind in matters of this sort.

"I think, perhaps, I'm beginning to," his companion said. "You see," she marshalled her impressions

thoughtfully, "she has got her memories back, her faith and trust. She can take them out once more and find a comfort in them, that she would never have known if she hadn't come so near to losing them. And to a woman, memories mean so much."

The Skipper was silent a moment. His prejudices died hard. Unconsciously he found it difficult to relinquish his last and biggest grievance against his late *bête-noir*. He wasn't sure, even yet, that what had happened to-day was for the best; particularly if it meant that Clover was going to live entirely in the past for God alone knew how long!—perhaps while youth and all the chances of a warm vital happiness passed her by.

"Do you feel that this woman told the truth?" he asked gloomily.

Letitia Cunliffe thought so. Oh, decidedly she thought so. Where would have been the point in lying?

"And if she had . . . does it matter?" she cried with hushed vehemence. "Does *anything* matter that has given the child back to us like that?"

Once again Lindham's glance followed hers. Clover had stirred a little in her sleep, had murmured something. A half-smile parted her lips; the watchers bent to listen.

"She is among her memories," Letitia Cunliffe murmured softly, "and they won't hurt her now."

The Skipper grunted. For once he had no jibe to launch at the other's incurable sentimentalism.

CHAPTER XXII

On the day after Clover and her aunt returned from London, the morning papers had an announcement which set tongues wagging speculatively once more, and revived acute interest in the Karslake case. Scotland Yard, on behalf of the murdered man's widow, offered a thousand pounds reward for any information which would definitely lead to the arrest of his murderer.

Inspector Benshaw shook his head pessimistically; he had been one of the officials present when the lady had been interrogated. The case, he considered stood just where it was before she arrived; it would get no further for any offers of reward. It was always these crimes committed without a reasonable motive—the result of a disordered brain—which presented the greatest difficulties. For since the three people who had met in Lord Belford's sanctum to debate the matter of Sir Charles Haile's information had kept their own counsel, with the one exception of Nick's admissions to Clover, Benshaw saw no reason to alter his original theory. It had been shaken a little when Karslake's widow turned up. Possibilities had suggested themselves at last of various motives—jealousy, self-interest, an angry emissary from the deserted wife, summary vengeance at the hands of one of her friends. . . .

But the Spanish woman, in her voluble flood of reminiscence, delivered in a slightly foreign accent with an un-English tempestuousness, had disposed of most of those possibilities. She had made it quite clear that the dead man had believed himself to be a widower. It was he, and

not she, who had a grievance, if he had only known it. The name of Inez Isabella Karslake had, it seemed, been given by mistake in a list of the victims of an earthquake that had claimed a heavy death-toll five years ago; and she had never troubled to contradict it.

"For me, I had no wish to marry again; but I see now that I gave not enough thought to the poor Juan," she had explained, with what Benshaw had privately considered an exceedingly belated remorse. Yet man-like, his condemnation of her had been mitigated by the undoubted allure of her personality. Her great eyes had dwelt tragically on him, and her soft voice had broken a little in a half sob that was huskily melodious, as she had thanked him for all he had done to try and bring the assassin to justice.

"A fine woman, Major," he said to Duncan Fairlie afterwards. "You'd have fancied a man would have thought twice before he let himself be separated from a wife as handsome as that."

Miss Cunliffe owned to Mrs. Aylmer that the whole thing was very difficult to understand.

"Admitted," she said, "that Clover is different to most girls, even so her attitude towards this woman still surprises me. One has heard, of course, of cases in which the affection which two women have had for the same man has been an actual bond of union between them——"

Ruth Aylmer intervened vigorously. The three were discussing the affair one afternoon in the drawing-room at the Firs. Clover was out in the garden, marking the tennis lawn with Nick Storrington, who had lunched with them, and the girl's clear voice could be heard ringing out occasionally in a vivacious fashion that brought a contented smile to her aunt's lips.

"But then one of them would have to be a saint,"

Ruth exclaimed. "The kind of woman who takes her griefs to a convent; the sort that Tennyson described . . . 'Meek, paleblooded, prayerful, she will yield herself to God.' Now would you have said that the Spanish woman was that type? Because very certainly Clover isn't, is she?"

"No," Miss Cunliffe admitted, smiling involuntarily. "There's never been anything saintly about the child, bless her! But as for the other, I know no more than you. She didn't look the 'meek and prayerful' type. She was a handsome creature in a rather bold, flamboyant style, who managed even to make her mourning look showy. You could have guessed, I think, that she was Juan Karslake's cousin; although of course people of the same nation always have a superficial likeness to each other, in the eyes of foreigners."

There was silence for a few moments.

"It seems hard on poor Nick Storrington to have to lose Danesthorpe for the second time," Mrs. Aylmer said.

"A rotten position!" Ruth added feelingly. "And one daren't even condole with him. He would probably snub you if you did—oh, very, very charmingly!—but you'd feel a thoroughly tactless idiot all the same!"

On the tennis lawn outside, Clover, as she helped Nick put away the tennis marker, was inwardly echoing Ruth's sentiments.

It seemed to her that when she had walked out of the Milan Hotel that fateful afternoon, she had walked into a new, strange world. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that for the first time for four months she moved about her world with eyes which were no longer blind to everything but her own loss and her wretchedness.

It had taken her a surprisingly brief while to readjust

her mental focus; the innate sweetness and generosity of her, frozen so long at its very source, put out tentative exploring hands almost at once, testing, wondering, startled and shocked at what she saw now to have been the self-centredness of her own grief.

To Nick she had been a little more communicative about her London visit than she had been to anyone else. She felt that she couldn't allow him to remain under the misleading impression which Sir Charles Haile's repetition of an old rumour had created. It was only rumour. She assured him now that she had satisfied herself as to this.

She had learnt exactly how those defamatory rumours about Juan had originated in Madrid eight years ago; and she was satisfied that there had been no foundation for them beyond the foolish—but not *criminal*—wildness to which headstrong youth, particularly when rich and disillusioned, has always been liable since the world has had temptations to offer.

She didn't put it quite so concisely. but that was what it came to.

And Nick raised his eyebrows as he listened to her, and the queer little twist to his lips was more marked than usual.

"You don't believe it?" she had flashed out. "You think I'm just credulous and easily deceived?"

"I'm glad that you should believe anything that makes you happier," he said gently.

She gave a little impatient exclamation, advance guard of a flood of impetuous protest, then closed her lips firmly, biting off the rest.

Her reticence perplexed Storrington. Why this sudden withholding of her confidence from him, who had for so long been the patient recipient of it.

He didn't understand her. She had never been more

attractive in his eyes; but . . . she wasn't the girl he had known for the past few months; neither was she the same girl as last year. It was difficult to say in exactly what the distinction consisted; but she was . . . *different*. She had come back to her friends, as it were, from out the shadow of a stranger's grave—herself, in some indefinable way, more than half a stranger. Even the big wolfhound knew it. He had greeted her on her return from London with exuberant manifestations of joy, rising to his towering height, planting his forepaws heavily on her shoulders and licking her face and hands. But presently his transports had quieted down into a puzzled wistfulness. He couldn't bear her out of his sight, and when she was there, he seemed perpetually to be expecting something from her which she couldn't give. . . .

Duncan Fairlie walked over to tea at the Firs that afternoon and Storrington motored him home afterwards. For the first five minutes neither spoke. Then, abruptly, the older man broke the silence.

"Damn-lucky thing," he jerked out, "that as far as any intention of bigamy went, this widow woman was able to clear Karslake's character."

"But *has* she cleared it?" Nick asked with irrepressible bitterness. "How the devil is one to know? No one but Clover has heard what she really *did* say."

"You think the widow may have been kind-hearted at the expense of truth?" The keen, non-committal eyes were flashed for a moment on Storrington's gloomy face. "Yet I can't see why the devil she should; and, hang it all! Karslake never gave one any reason to believe that he was that kind of blackguard."

Nick hesitated for a moment.

"Nor can I see why she should," he said slowly. "But as it happens, I personally have reasons for thinking not too well of him. This is between ourselves, mind you.

It is not to go any farther, for Clover's sake." He glanced questioningly at his companion, and Fairlie made a gesture of assent. He was no talker, but as has been said before, he had that curious gift which some men possess of being able to make other men talk.

Now he listened intently while Storrington vented some of the bitterness that seethed in him by repeating Sir Charles Haile's story. If Fairlie thought as he listened that Storrington had taken a big responsibility upon himself in keeping these facts from the police, he didn't say so.

All he said was, thoughtfully,

"So there was some method in his madness after all! Poor fellow, he thought himself safe behind his high park walls with his picked servants, and his great dogs; and all the while Fate was silently drawing nearer and nearer along the road to those locked gates . . . I wonder how long the fellow had been inside those gates before he showed himself that night?"

Storrington frowned. His hand tightened involuntarily on the steering wheel and the car swerved slightly.

"Beastly thought!" he said.

"Well, that sort of thing isn't carried out all in a hurry . . . By George! what would old Benshaw give to know all this!"

"I doubt if it would help him much," Nick said.

"Help him? oh, no!" the other's tone was acutely ironic. "It would merely be the first clue of any kind that the police have had to deal with yet—that's all."

"Well, they've got to do without it," Storrington said bluntly. "A great deal too much mud would be stirred up in the process."

Then Duncan Fairlie made a curious remark. "I've always thought that myself," he said grimly.

"*You* have? Why?"

Nick turned swiftly and looked at him, startled, questioning; but the expression of the lean, hard face told him even less than Fairlie's answer.

"Mud sticks," the older man said briefly. "And you never know who's going to be splashed."

It wasn't an answer to Nick's question, but he didn't press it. He drove Fairlie on to the village, past the Danesthorpe lodge gates, where old Owen lived a life of complete idleness these days. Arrived at Fairlie's bungalow, a stone's throw from the golf links, he stayed to supper. There had come on him, not for the first time, a shuddering aversion to the vast lonely spaces of Danesthorpe Park and the big empty house brooding deserted over the gardens where a murderer had lurked in the winter darkness, and the summer hut to which poor Pollux had crept for shelter in his death agonies.

He wasn't superstitious; but on one or two evenings lately, it had seemed to him as he crossed the park and saw the red sunset reflected in the distant windows of the Hall, that the reddest glow of all—a redness as of blood, stained the blank windows of the library where Juan Karslake had met his death.

Resolutely now he put all thought of the tragedy away from him, and the two men talked on impersonal subjects for the rest of the evening.

Time enough, too, Storrington told himself, savagely self-condemning, as he drove home.

What folly had induced him to be so communicative? Fairlie was the last man in the world to whom Haile's story should have been passed on. It was so clear that the thing had gripped his imagination. What was it he had said about "Fate drawing silently nearer and nearer . . ."?

Yes! Storrington thought grimly. Tramping along the road through a January mist, Fate in the shape of a

nondescript shabby sort of man with a sallow face and a bullet head; a man who called himself Belgian and poured out a stream of Spanish in his delirium . . . a man who carried a curiously marked map that was leading him straight to those locked gates of Danesthorpe Hall.

Fate? Oh yes, you might call it Fate that had made "Albert Bonnin" drop his map in the road, when the motor van ran him down, and Fate which had ordained that Storrington should pick up that soiled and crumpled piece of paper; Fate also which had brought Storrington to the unconscious man's bedside when he was calling huskily and inappropriately on every saint in the Spanish Calendar.

A most efficient partner, Fate, for a man who has the nerve to play the cards she deals him; but . . . What had it all come to?

Another coffin in the Karslake vault, a coffin that raised as effective a barrier between him and Clover Willoughby as its occupant had been in his lifetime; the prospect of strangers shortly entering into possession of the old house . . .

That was all.

He was thinking so one evening after he had returned from a long day spent visiting outlying farms. He had come back late; dined, and worked in his office till past eleven. Then, restless and moody, he went out into the garden with a cigarette; but even here he felt cramped and hedged in, and presently he wandered into the park. It was a perfect evening; all the scents of early summer were abroad in the fragrant dusk. The park lay shadowy and still, its clubs of big trees rising solid and motionless against a dim sky diamond-dusted with stars.

He sauntered on, smoking mechanically, scarcely noticing where he went; and he was crossing an open space where the long grass parted to right and left before his

tread, and moths and other winged things fluttered up in front of him, when he stopped suddenly, staring across at the dark, distant bulk of the Hall.

There was no sunset now to reflect itself on any pane of glass. The glow that clearly marked those end windows on the ground floor came from inside—not a question of it. Someone was in the library. Who on earth could it be at this hour? The Ridgeways who were acting as caretakers, had frankly owned to him that, excepting when it was necessary to air the library, they both gave that room a wide berth, particularly after nightfall. What, then, could the light mean?

For a moment, his very pulses seemed to be held in arrest; then a string of possible explanations began to hustle each other through his mind with betraying eagerness. Mentally he gripped himself in a firm hold. This wouldn't do—to panic in this damn-fool fashion for a thing that had probably the most simple of explanations. He was feeling seedy . . . below par; that was at the bottom of it.

The Ridgeways might very easily have had visitors to supper, and were gratifying morbid curiosity by allowing them a glance round the scene of the murder. Or they might have heard one of the many odd sounds that haunt an old house and were making a tour of investigation.

No; the light glowed steadily through the brocade curtains, it didn't flicker or vanish; someone had been in that room for several minutes; they weren't merely walking through. And what the devil had put the word "haunt" into his head? Must he tell himself for the hundredth time that hauntings and such superstitions were beliefs for children and for the uneducated?

Haunt . . . a murderer haunting the scene of his crimes . . .

Of all the damned rot! Bonnin was out of England

long ago. And if he weren't, there was nothing to draw him back to Danesthorpe . . .

Nevertheless Storrington threw away his half-smoked cigarette, methodically trod out the glowing end of it, and set out swiftly across the grass in the direction of those lighted windows. He would find out for himself; there would be no sleep for him this night unless his mind were set at rest.

As he approached the house, the wall that divided the park from the front lawn and its encircling drive, rose up before him, blotting out the lower windows. But when he had passed through the gates he saw the light again in the two windows at the end of the long façade. The rest of the front of the house was in darkness. He made his way, treading softly, round the corner of the house on to the terrace which ran along the side of it. To his left were the other windows of the library. To his right the formal gardens lay spread out in pale, intricate patterns under the night sky. The stillness everywhere was as of the dead—a heavy, eerie, lifeless stillness . . .

Storrington caught himself up angrily. There he was again harping on the same gruesome note, death, eeriness . . .

Damn it all! there was nothing supernatural about the light that shone through those curtained windows. Ridiculous even to imagine it! It was an odd thing, though, that the shutters weren't fastened . . . or, *were* they? He approached one of the windows cautiously and peered through it. But he could see nothing save that the shutters were *not* closed. The curtains were drawn closely across the deep embrasure, and the thought struck him that this was probably the very window in which the murderer might have hidden, waiting for his victim. Surely it was this very curtain—not more than a couple of feet away from him on the other side of the glass—

which had been partly torn down in the struggle between the two men?

He recoiled involuntarily at the thought. Reason and argument were beyond him for the moment; he felt suddenly cold to his marrow, for all the mildness of the night air. Then, as he moved away, his eyes still riveted in reluctant fascination on those straight hanging folds, he saw something that froze the very blood in his veins. A hand slid through the opening in the curtains—a man's hand, slim, beautifully shaped. It grasped the folds with a convulsive gesture, dragged them violently aside. One imagined that the rings on the curtain rods must be rattling noisily; but not a sound penetrated to the watcher outside the window, and to his horrified mind the question thudded home with sinister insistence:—*Was there any sound to be heard?*

Yet in the aperture between the parted curtains a man was standing, with his back partly turned to the window; but even so there was no mistaking that smooth black head, the clean dark outline of jaw and cheekbone.

Nicholas Storrington knew it well enough. He who had scoffed at ghosts, was looking now, with distended eyes and blanched face, at a man whose coffin he had followed through the churchyard to its last resting place; staring at a hand whose smooth brown fingers he had once clasped in friendly greeting and last seen, maimed and charred to a terrible shapelessness, in this same room . . .

Still with that hideous soundlessness the figure flung up both arms, releasing the curtain, and staggered away. From where Storrington stood he could no longer see it.

God! he had seen enough! Part of that tragedy of a winter's night four months ago had been actually enacted before his eyes. And now the curtain, swinging back,

shut him out alone in the dark, face to face with his own memories, and with the oldest dread known to man—the stark, unreasoning horror of those who come back mysteriously, unsought and pitifully unwanted, to the earth from which they were reft in violence and blood.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE stout, wheezy caretaker at Danesthorpe Hall had grown so accustomed to Major Fairlie's frequent visits that she often scarcely remembered whether he were on the premises or not.

But she was always rather pleased to see his tall gaunt figure arrive and sorry to see him depart. When Ridgeway was working some distance away from the house itself, she liked to feel that she wasn't the only person in the great silent building—even though the library was so far away from the servants' quarters that no sound of his presence could have reached her. In fact her only intimation of his departure was the ringing of the library bell. He invariably rang it twice, and then let himself out without waiting for her to answer it; so that if she happened to be busy, she was saved unnecessary journeys from the far end of the house to know whether she might lock and bolt the front door again. He was also wont to leave his hat and stick on a table in the hall, so that their absence was enough to show her that he had departed and she had no need to go again into the library—a room which she avoided, when alone, as much as possible.

"A very thoughtful gentleman, the Major," Mrs. Ridgeway pronounced him with short-breathed asthmatical appreciation. Wherein she certainly spoke the truth. Duncan Fairlie seldom did things unthinkingly; only the methods he had adopted in this instance had been inspired by a thoughtfulness which took in a wider scope than a caretaker's convenience. He had created a precedent, established a custom which might some day—one never

knew—give him a free hand in continuing certain investigations which he had already carried out in the library at Danesthorpe.

So it happened that on the day when Mr. Caldecott brought Juan Karslake's widow to Danesthorpe Hall, Major Fairlie had dropped in earlier in the afternoon. By some mysterious means known only to himself, he had become aware of their arrival very nearly as soon as the landlord of the Karslake Arms, where the car which brought them from London had stopped before going on to the Hall. They had lunched in a private room at the Inn, and Mr. Caldecott had engaged a bedroom for himself; the widow, it appeared, intended to stay the night at the Hall. No one had been advised of their visit—not even Storrington; and as it occurred on that day when he happened to be out from early morning, visiting a distant part of the property, he knew nothing of it. They motored up to the Hall later in the afternoon and arrived after Fairlie had presumably left.

The library bell had pealed its customary signal; and when Mrs. Ridgeway had answered it ten minutes later, the battered felt hat and twisted hazel stick had been missing from the hall.

She had turned the big key in the door, shot the bolts, and was retreating thankfully from the gloomy and dust-sheeted desolation of this part of the building to her own comfortable quarters, when, with a shrill suddenness that made her start and gasp, the doorbell pealed again.

"Bless us and save us! And who might that be?" she muttered and waddled back, her footsteps echoing on the stone flags. They could be heard even in the library, where a long, lean man with an expressionless face had taken up his position just within the folds of a tall stamped leather screen that stood half closed in a corner by the further bookshelves. The lean man's hat and stick were

on the floor by his feet, and he held an open book in his hand. If anyone should look behind the screen it might easily seem that he had been searching for a volume in the shelves there, and that his being hidden was purely an accident. On the other hand, through the hinges of that screen he could see everything that happened in the room, and hear everything that was said. This last fact, be it remarked, didn't cause him a single qualm. He would have been ready to bet that there would be very little for him to overhear. The widow, he fancied, would rid herself of her companion's presence as soon as she could do it with decent civility. It wasn't to eavesdrop upon a lawyer and his client that Duncan Fairlie had taken up his invidious position. For all he would learn in that way, he might as well have stayed at home. It was from the actions of Juan Karslake's widow that he hoped to learn something that would take him a little further along a resurrected trail. He had no hopes of any enlightenment from that respectable elderly gentleman who was supposed officially to be the repository of the Karslake family secrets, and who looked now, as he followed the lady and the caretaker into the room, like a man who found his position a very onerous one.

If Mrs. Ridgeway was flustered and curious, Mr. Caldecott was obviously harassed and fatigued. The motor journey up from London had taken four hours altogether; and he wore the air that might be expected of a conventional lawyer who had taken a long motor-journey cheek by jowl, as it were, with a slumbering volcano.

All day he had dreaded an emotional scene.

Now, to his horror, Mrs. Ridgeway, having recovered from the first shock of their arrival, was evidently prepared to make a ghoulish most of her opportunities for evoking one.

"This is the room, madam, where the poor gentleman

was found," she announced in hushed and lugubrious tones. "Right here by the fireplace it was they found him . . ."

Mr. Caldecott hastily stemmed her eloquence.

"That will do, thank you, Mrs. Ridgeway," he interposed hastily and emphatically. "If you would kindly tell the chauffeur where to put Mrs. Karslake's suitcase . . . and . . . and get a room ready for her to-night. You can provide some tea, I suppose? and a light supper? She will be leaving to-morrow early . . ."

He was talking rapidly, one repressive eye—as it were—on the caretaker, the other, nervously watchful, on that sable-clad figure standing erect and rigid a few paces inside the room, her eyes sweeping it in comprehensive silence, her fingers twisting and untwisting restlessly.

Feeling, as he did, that the storm might break at any moment, he longed heartily to be out of this huge, cheerless house and speeding on his way down the park back to the cheerful comfort of the Karslake Arms—a good plain dinner and a glass or two of the sound wine which the landlord kept for honoured guests. He felt that he needed it badly.

Mrs. Ridgeway, her wheezy garrulity checked in one direction overflowed in another.

Oh, certainly. If the lady would put up with something quite simple, she could manage nicely, and only too glad to oblige. A chop, now, and some new potatoes and a little stewed fruit . . . Would Mrs. Karslake perhaps like her dinner in her room or——

"I would prefer it here." The soft, rather husky voice with its faint foreign accent delivered what was evidently a bombshell to Mrs. Ridgeway and the lawyer. A *macabre* choice for a solitary meal—this room of sinister associations! "And I do not desire any tea, thank you;

and I would greatly wish to be alone now for a little time."

She threw a sombre glance—half imperious, half appealing—at the lawyer and the open-mouthed caretaker. Her scarlet lips quivered as she moved further into the room, and flinging herself with a dramatic gesture of abandon and a little weary moan into one of the big armchairs, buried her face in her hands.

"Eh, poor dear, poor dear!" muttered Mrs. Ridgeway sympathetically.

Mr. Caldecott cleared his throat, shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, and prayed inwardly that the tempest of grief which Juan Karslake's widow could apparently summon at will, might not break until he had departed.

Common humanity impelled him, however, to ask her again whether, at the last moment, she really wished to be left here alone? and whether she didn't require his support and assistance in the task of looking through the dead man's personal belongings, which had all been put away in one of the rooms upstairs.

She shook her head in answer, raising a tragic face. No, she was not nervous; and she required no help. He was not to concern himself about her; he would find her ready and packed in the morning, when he came to fetch her.

She held out her hand to him in a superb gesture of farewell and dismissal. All her movements were lithe and dramatic. The watcher behind the screen, motionless, staring intently through the hinge of it, told himself sardonically that he had met the type before.

His eyes narrowed as he watched her, coldly critical. An emotional *poseuse*—that was his verdict.

He watched the relieved lawyer depart with almost indecent haste, and heard Mrs. Ridgeway, awed for once

into something very near speechlessness, take her orders from the lady—weary, toneless orders—to get her a bedroom ready, and to leave her.

"And when I wish to seek my room, I will ring . . . There is a bell . . . yes?" Her eyes roamed the big room inquiringly. "And you shall return and show me where it is that I shall sleep," she added as an afterthought.

The caretaker, breathing heavy sympathy, made as ostentatiously noiseless an exit as her weighty bulk would allow. The door closed softly behind her. Mrs. Juan Karslake sat on, motionless, staring in front of her, the griefs of all the world's mourners in every line and drooping fold of her black garments.

Fairlie gave her full meed of admiration for that. The human being who plays a part even in solitude is a very finished performer. His interest in her grew.

Now she rose, still with that studied grace, and moved across to the fireplace, turning when she reached it and glancing down the long room. She was standing—he noted the fact with a quickening of his pulses—on the very spot where her husband's body had lain. Did she realize it? But of course she did! She knew it well enough, he told himself. The question was—*What else did she know?*

A fine woman,—he admitted it grudgingly. Benshaw's description had been apt. Taller than the average, broad-shouldered and holding herself well, the straight, easy-fitting modern dress lent itself kindly to a figure that had more of the long athletic lines of a Diana about it than the softer curves of a nymph or the fuller proportions of a Juno.

Her brooding glance swept the room with a slow curiosity that held a mingling of wonder and satisfaction. Yes, satisfaction—not a doubt of it. There was almost *tri-*

umph on that olive-skinned face, heavily powdered after the fashion of feminine Spain, garishly handsome with its reddened lips and bistred eyes.

She stood there where the dead man had lain; then turned again, and her eyes dropped to the empty grate and rested on it.

What had been her part in the recent tragedy, if any? Exactly how much did she know or guess? Spying unashamedly through the hinges of his screen, he wondered and watched.

Presently she swung round with one of her swift lithe movements, took a cigarette-case out of the bag which was slung over her arm, lit a cigarette with the quick deft fingers of the habitual smoker, and tossed bag and cigarette case on to a chair.

Then she crossed the room with long, light steps, and paused by the little table which had been overturned on the night of the murder.

They had told her all about it, of course. It was natural enough that she should pick up and scrutinize, with perhaps a shuddering curiosity, the remaining African knife—Scotland Yard still retained the other. But—Fairlie drew in his breath sharply—was it natural that her glance should turn so unfalteringly to the exact spot, some yards away, where the bloodstain still showed faintly on the pale, fawn-coloured carpet?

The sound that broke from Juan Karslake's widow, as she gazed down at that stain, would have shocked anyone but the man behind the screen.

For it was a laugh!—a short, soft laugh, with a curious touch of grimness in it.

It didn't shock Fairlie; but it did wake an echo in his memory that nearly jolted him into a resounding expletive. He caught it back just in time, breathless, literally quivering with excitement. The woman moved on into

the embrasure of the window and stood there with her back to him, stooping forward, peering, searching. Fairlie slipped from behind the screen and advanced quietly into the middle of the room.

Slight as was the sound he made, she heard him. She swung round, startled and dismayed, her hands clenched at her sides, her cigarette still between her lips. So they stood, staring at each other for a brief moment, fraught with unutterable things.

Then:

"I must apologize," he said gravely, "for having intruded on you, but I was here when you arrived. I have been given permission to use this library."

"Ah . . . yes!" She had recovered her self-possession, but that brief moment when she had lost it had been enough for Fairlie. He had read instant recognition between those heavily blackened lids. Yes, *recognition;* veiled at once in wary defensiveness. "And why should you not have permission? My poor husband would, I am sure, have desired it, if you were a friend of his," she added graciously.

"And for that you are obliged to take my word?" His ironical tone held no hint of deprecation to match his first apology. Deliberately he proceeded to take a strapped leather pocket-book out of his breast pocket, and shake a small shining object out of it on to the palm of his lean, tanned hand.

"This, I think, is what you were looking for just now," he remarked quietly, as he held it out to her.

She stared silently at the little silver bullet, slightly flattened, which lay in his hard palm, but she made no movement to take it.

"When . . . and where . . . did you find that?" she asked at last in a low expressionless voice.

"In the window panel; the day before the inquest."

Fairlie's short, brief sentences were snapped out now like the pistol-shot which had once echoed here. "Later I came back and dug it out." He waited, and as she made no comment, he dropped the bullet back into the pocket-book, replacing it in his pocket; then taking out his cigarette-case, he laid his hand with a swift, unexpected gesture on his companion's black-sleeved arm.

The effect of his touch was instantaneous. Under his fingers he felt her muscles harden and tauten suddenly, and in her turn she made a quick, curious movement which she checked almost instantly as though realizing the futility of it. Duncan Fairlie smiled grimly, and released the surprisingly sinewy arm which the thin black sleeve had camouflaged. He had recognized that quick movement which had answered his own; it was the instinctive response to danger made by those who in wild countries carry a weapon. But there was no weapon concealed in his companion's black draperies; and if there had been, Fairlie didn't fancy that it would have been drawn on him.

"Your cigarette's gone out, Karslake," he said very slowly and deliberately. "Have one of mine?"

CHAPTER XXIV

THERE was a moment's breathless, poignant pause.

"My God!" the other said under his breath.

The foreign accent had vanished; the tense attitude suddenly relaxed. A curious, indefinable change seemed all at once to take place before Fairlie's eyes in the tall figure that had seemed so unquestionably feminine. And it was a man's voice that spoke—the voice of a man whose coffin lay in the Karslake vault.

"So you knew, then, confound you! all the time?" Juan Karslake said.

He leant back against the fateful panelling with the same, soft, grim laugh that had already betrayed him, and coolly lit the cigarette which the other proffered.

For all its grimness, his was an oddly friendly laugh.

Yet Fairlie was the only person who *knew;* Fairlie alone of all the neighbourhood had contrived to avoid the farce of following the coffin of a complete stranger to the vault where it had no right to lie; he was the one man whose knowledge could bring Karslake into unpleasant proximity with the hangman's noose.

"Yes, I knew," he answered now, briefly.

The other surveyed him with narrowed eyes, those "eyes of a haunted devil," shining between blackened lashes, but curiously warm now and soft.

"And you said nothing? Told no one?"

"It wasn't my business," Fairlie said drily, "to track down a friend of mine whose method of vanishing was likely to land him into trouble."

Karslake drew a long breath.

"By God, Fairlie, you're a sportsman!" he said slowly and emphatically. Then, after a moment, "Might one ask how the devil you found out?"

"By the bullet, first," Fairlie answered. "That set me thinking. I asked myself why, since you obviously weren't shot by the fireplace, you were found so far from the place where you *were* shot? And again, why the fireplace in particular? You'll see that I had a choice of two answers. Either the murderer had been out to make the thing look like suicide and had taken fright before his arrangements were complete, and left the signs of a struggle to witness against him; or something that *had* to be done to make the man who *was* dead, unrecognizable from a man who, for some reason or other wished to *appear* dead. My theories led me finally to a corpse whose clothes, on a near inspection, fitted damn badly. . . . Any decent tailor should have been ashamed to send 'em out. I simply couldn't swallow those clothes . . . on *you.* Nor did I believe"—under his little grizzled moustache his lips curled in a sardonic smile—"that you were ever in the habit of wearing your right shoe on your left foot."

"Good Lord! did I do that?" Karslake asked in unaffected chagrin. "I must have lost my head pretty considerably."

"I should hardly have accused you of that," Fairlie commented drily. "This part of the business," his glance indicated his companion's effective disguise, "must have needed an uncommonly cool head, I should say, to carry through."

The other shrugged his shoulders. He drew a long brown finger thoughtfully along the smooth upper lip which had once been adorned by a little dark moustache. His philosophical lack of embarrassment was in itself

disarming; and now that he had relaxed his guard and dropped into an easy natural pose, it seemed almost unbelievable, looking at him and talking to him, that *any* disguise could enable so dominantly masculine a personality to pass muster as a woman. Yet Fairlie, now that he had seen this man act, not only on the stage, but at close quarters, with no glamour to help him save that glamour of his own consummate talent, could well understand that at a moment's notice the transition from Juan Karslake to Juan Karslake's widow—that effectively tragic, sombre figure—might take place even while he watched.

"This part of the business was unfortunately essential," Karslake remarked, "for . . ." he hesitated, then in a softer, lingering tone as though the very name were too precious to be spoken lightly—"for Clover's sake," he said. "There was no other way of touching my own money. And it's been easier than you'd think. My wife and I were cousins, you see, and there was a very strong likeness between us. It's five years since she was killed in that earthquake, and though there was ample proof of her death *then,* I relied on its being almost impossible after all this time to produce enough evidence to discredit anyone who impersonated her. Also, it would be eight years now since any of her old friends had seen her. Now, if I pull this off and get away with it, and Clover joins me abroad at least she won't be marrying a pauper, even if she is marrying a man who'll have to spend the rest of his life under another name and in another hemisphere. Nor a murderer," he added steadily. "I swear to you, Fairlie, that I shot the fellow in sheer self-defence though a jury would probably want more proof than I'm in a position to give them."

"I don't know so much about that," Fairlie said thoughtfully. "If you'd called in the police at once . . .

The man broke in, didn't he? Saunders never admitted him; he had no right to be on the premises at all; and he knifed you, I imagine?"

"Oh, Lord, yes. All that's true enough; but I had very special reasons for wanting the police kept out of it—for wanting *everyone* kept out of it. It sounds mad, I know, but now when a prison actually yawns for me, for the first time for eight years I'm a free man. Yes, that's the literal truth. By the way,"—he broke off abruptly,—"give the police the tip, will you, to be careful with that knife. They've got it still, I suppose? Anyway, it was poisoned. I didn't know it when I got the pair of them in Africa; but I knew it all right after that fellow slashed me in the arm with it. The stuff must be very old, luckily, and have lost a good deal of its potency, but it's pretty active still. While there was all that first hue and cry for the Karslake murderer, I was in lodgings somewhere near the London Docks, off my head with a raging fever and being nursed by a kind old soul who believed me to be a foreign sailor knifed in a drunken brawl. She'd had a sailor son who died abroad and she was thundering good to me. Look here, Fairlie," he swung round impetuously, lines of strain and weariness were visible about his eyes and mouth—"it's not safe for us to talk here much longer. If you want to hear the whole story, will you come back here to-night when the Ridgeways have gone to bed? If I lock these doors it will be quite safe, and I can let you in by the conservatory. You'll be doing a charitable action. I'll shed these ghastly togs and clean this infernal muck off my face and get into my own clothes again for a bit. They're all put away upstairs, I hear. And I tell you, if I can't talk to someone for a couple of hours or so, as man to man, I shall go crazy!"

Fairlie nodded.

"I'll come," he said. "Since it seems that I'm making

myself an accessory after the fact, there are a good many things I want to understand. You seem, at least," he added with a grim humour, "to have spoken as *man* to *woman* very successfully at the Milan Hotel the other day."

The look of strain left the younger man's face; it softened amazingly.

"That surprises you?" he said quietly. "It didn't surprise *me,* although you mustn't think that I don't realize how marvellous it is that any woman should accept such a discovery as Clover made that afternoon, with such nerve, such swift understanding and such divine forgiveness. It's . . . utterly wonderful! But it didn't surprise me. She is simply what I knew that she was—not only different in type to any woman I have ever known, but head and shoulders, herself, above all the rest of her type, fine though it is!"

There was no mistaking the man's intense feeling—it was plainly written on his face; a passion tempered with all the sane, glad reverence of a man whose previous experience had been both mad and bitter.

But as Fairlie had said, there were still a good many things that he wanted to understand. His responsibility for the future of his old friend's ward weighed heavily on him; he couldn't allow his own irrepressible personal liking to bias him in Karslake's favour. The things he still wanted to understand had a very ugly sound.

He made his way quietly out into the hall by way of the conservatory. If Mrs. Ridgeway were anywhere about he intended to explain that he had sauntered in there to look at the plants, and hearing the arrival of Mr. Caldecott and his companion, had kept out of the way till he was sure the coast was clear.

But he met neither of the Ridgeways, and once outside, he struck off across the park in the direction of the side-

door. The key of that side-door still hung on a nail in the library, and this afternoon as he walked away he carried it in his pocket. He had plenty of time on his hands and he *wanted* time . . . to think. But he chose the short cut rather than go round by the lodge. In that last direction there was more chance of meeting Nick, and he would prefer not to meet him at present. The claims of two friendships were placing him in a very difficult position. This matter concerned Storrington so much more nearly than himself, that he felt almost a traitor to that older friendship in making his decision without taking the other into his confidence.

Yet if those sinister points which troubled him could be cleared up to his satisfaction, he knew that he wouldn't take anyone into his confidence, nor would he raise a finger to prevent Karslake's peaceful departure from Danesthorpe and from England. Nor to hinder Clover Willoughby from joining him abroad and flinging in her lot with a self-confessed man-slayer.

He would be doing an illegal thing; he would be technically aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice. But there it was! And if *he* raised no finger to stop it, no one else would, since no one else would ever know.

No one?

Duncan Fairlie was not omniscient. His summing up of the position took no account of a man who later that night was to see a ghost in the library of Danesthorpe Hall.

So he walked home through the peaceful sun and shadow of the park and reached his cosy little bungalow to find that the afternoon post had brought him—to-day of all days—the very news for which he had been waiting.

He had been expecting it . . . and dreading it.

He who would have confessed to fearing very few things in a life where he had walked cheek by jowl with

many unpleasant forms of death, frankly dreaded what that letter might contain.

It bore a Spanish stamp, which he first carefully tore off and put aside for the stamp collection of a youthful nephew. The stamp was of no great value; but the signature of the letter, on the other hand, would have been very much appreciated by any collector of documents that dealt with criminology.

The man who had signed that letter was one of the many queer friends whom Duncan Fairlie had made in different parts of the world. He was also a man who held a very high post in the *Brigádá Especiál* of the *Dirección General de Seguridad*. In other words, he was one of the heads of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Police Headquarters in Madrid.

CHAPTER XXV

At twelve o'clock that night, Fairlie, as had been arranged, stood outside the conservatory at Danesthorpe Hall and tapped softly upon the door.

He smiled sardonically to himself as he waited there. It was a curious situation, this secret midnight assignation with a man who was wanted by the police for his own murder! Or should one say, an assignation with the widow of a man who was neither dead nor married?

The door handle turned, the glass door opened an inch or two, someone retreated back from it into the gloom of the dark conservatory. He entered, locked the door behind him and followed a shadowy figure into the library. Then Karslake in his turn closed the library door and locked it.

"I can offer you a drink of sorts," he said, as he indicated a flask, a syphon and tumbler. "I brought the whisky and soda down in my suitcase; I wasn't sure that Mrs. Ridgeway mightn't think it odd if I asked for anything of the kind. Sit down, won't you? It's poor hospitality, but——"

Fairlie interrupted in his brusque fashion.

"Don't bother about that," he said. "I don't want a drink yet. There's a lot to talk about first. God!" he stared half incredulously at the debonair, good-looking man in conventional evening clothes—dinner jacket, white shirt front, and perfectly manipulated black tie—who confronted him in the soft glow of the shaded electric lights. "I'm damned if I know how you've taken us all in as you have! Must be something, after all, in the old

saw that 'Clothes make the man!' A few yards of silk and lace and flimsy stuff . . ."

"And a good deal of paint and powder, plus a wig," the other reminded him lightly, passing his hand over his smooth black head.

"Did Clover know that you were coming down?"

"No." The other shook his head with a decision that belied the longing in his eyes. "We decided, in London, that there mustn't be any correspondence or any more meetings . . . in England. Good God, man!" he spoke with the roughness born of violent feeling, "do you think I've gone through the torture of these last months, to run any risks *now?*"

Fairlie's tone in answer was drier than usual. "I should have described those months as being not so much *your* torture as *hers,*" he remarked.

"Which is simply putting the same thing into different words," Karslake said more quietly. "Believe me or not, I hadn't a notion at first that I shouldn't be able to let her know that I was alive, to get news through to her somehow. You see, I hadn't taken that confounded poison into my calculations. By the time I had found lodgings that night in London, my arm was throbbing and burning, I was feeling desperately ill, almost light-headed, and fighting hard to keep a hold of my senses long enough to give a plausible account of myself before I collapsed. The stuff set up a kind of fever, and I wasn't really fully conscious again for nearly a week. Then I got hold of some papers at last and read about the inquest and my own funeral. That settled it. It seemed to me altogether too late to try and get into touch with Clover for the moment. One couldn't have expected any woman at that stage of the affair, when she'd been what the papers described as utterly prostrated, to keep her head in face of the kind of news I'd got to spring on her. I didn't dare

risk it; and I decided to wait a little till she was less likely to be bowled over by the shock. I'm not exaggerating, Fairlie, when I tell you that decision cost me more agony of mind than any I've ever made."

"I believe you," Fairlie said briefly.

"Thanks." The other's acknowledgment was equally brief. "I'd very much like to feel that you do, entirely apart from the fact that you've got it in your hands to queer the whole show if you choose to. What you want to know, of course, is the reason why I didn't call in the police to start with, and tell 'em the whole truth?"

"No," Fairlie said quietly. "It *was* one of the things I wanted to know; but since I saw you this afternoon I've had a letter from a friend of mine, and I can answer my own question by another." He paused and put that question very slowly and deliberately. *"How* long," he asked, "have this diabolical Brotherhood of the Scarlet Thumb been on your track? Nearly eight years, roughly speaking, isn't it?"

Karslake stared at him for a few seconds in the silence of sheer stupefaction.

"How on earth . . ." he began slowly.

The older man smiled.

"My correspondent," he said, "happens to be a rather important Police Official in Madrid. One of the big noises in the *Brigádá Especiál,* in fact."

The other drew a long breath.

"What made him write to you . . . about me?" he asked.

"I wrote to *him.*" Fairlie was clearly enjoying the reversal of their respective *rôles;* it was he now who was mystifying his companion. "I wrote to him because of something that Nick Storrington told me, a story for which a friend of the Belfords who used to live in Madrid was responsible. Storrington seemed to think there was

no getting away from it; but somehow it didn't convince me."

He proceeded to repeat Haile's story, giving each item its full value.

Karslake nodded. His face had grown harder as he listened. That brooding, haunted expression looked out again from his eyes.

"I know. Storrington told Clover." A deep resentment sounded in his voice. "He need hardly have done that," he said bitterly, "even if he believed it himself. And *that* I can understand. Storrington never liked me."

"What makes you say that?" Fairlie asked in some surprise. "I fancy most people thought"—he hesitated, —"that under the circumstances—which you must admit were a bit rough on him—he was rather surprisingly friendly."

Nick Storrington's cousin shook his head.

"Think so?" he smiled wryly. *"I* didn't. I wanted to be friends with him; I liked the fellow. But I was up against it all the time. Sometimes I almost felt that he hated me."

"Good God!" Fairlie stared at him. He was genuinely taken aback.

"Well, you can't blame him after all, can you?" the other said. "I don't blame him; excepting for trying to make Clover believe that I was every kind of blackguard. That was, I think"—his tone rang with suppressed feeling—"pretty rotten. It was also a damned lie."

"That's rather how it struck me," Fairlie rejoined quietly, and saw a quick flash of gratitude sweep resentment from the sombre, handsome face. "And one likes to find one's beliefs justified," he added. "My Spanish friend explains the matter completely. He points out"—a grim smile touched his thin lips, "that since you are no longer alive, there's no need to keep up a fiction that was

invented by the police . . . simply to safeguard you from the vengeance of this Brotherhood of the Scarlet Thumb."

Karslake nodded.

"Yes. It was through me that they were broken up," he said sombrely. "I went to the police and laid information as soon as I found out what kind of a crowd I'd blundered into. I'd been a young fool, going the pace as young fools do when they've made a mess of their lives; and I got put up for what I thought was a gambling club, by a fellow whom I believed at the time to be a friend of mine. Both delusions were soon exploded."

"But the delusion that the *Policia Secreta* were hunting for you to arrest you as a member of the gang, seems to have lasted quite a long time," Fairlie commented.

"It saved my life in the beginning," Karslake said. "Oh, I knew my danger when I brought the police down upon them; but, my God! they *needed* wiping out. When I think of all the damnable things that came out at the trials . . ." His face darkened at the memories which crowded back upon him. "Besides, I'd have risked any damn thing to get back on the fellow who'd let me in. He was one of the heads of the gang; there were several of his type among them. Received everywhere, decently born and bred, and foully crooked from the word 'go'!"

"They got him, it seems," Fairlie remarked.

"Oh, your friend told you that, did he?" Karslake's eyes narrowed, rested questioningly on his companion. "I wonder . . ."

"How much else he told me?" Fairlie finished his sentence for him. "Well, he told me a good deal. They've ways of finding out things, the police; and this fellow who let you in didn't keep a silent tongue in his head after they caught him. His kind don't, when they're up against a wall."

"He was my wife's lover," Karslake said grimly.

"Your friend told you that, I suppose? And you're wondering why the hell—half-Spanish as I am—I didn't shoot him when I found out?"

"No." Fairlie shook his head. He hesitated; then, "Forgive me, Karslake," he said; "but it's just as well that one of Clover Willoughby's friends should know the truth, eh? I'm given to understand that if you'd shot *all* your wife's lovers, you'd have had your work pretty well cut out for you, and I take it that you had too much of the Englishman in you to care about dragging your own name publicly in the mud."

The silence that followed could almost be felt. Fairlie himself concentrated an unnecessary amount of attention on lighting a cigarette. He didn't look at his companion. His mind was re-visualizing the savage, wounded pride of that half-Spanish boy, married to an utter wanton—a girl who had inherited the worst traits of her wild stock, with cunning enough to pose outwardly as an injured wife, to blacken her husband's character and win partisans even among the most strait-laced.

"Yes, it's true enough," Karslake said presently in a constrained voice. "She's dead now; the truth can't hurt her."

"And my friend in Madrid seems to think," Fairlie added in a deliberately lighter tone, "that *you* being dead, the truth about the betrayal of the Brotherhood of the Scarlet Thumb can't hurt *you*. So he's given it to me."

"He might as well have given it officially long ago," Karslake said, "since one of the gang found it out somehow about a year afterwards. I never bothered to let the police know. They couldn't help me then, and as far as my own reputation went, I was too sore about everything to care what was said about me. But the remnants of the Brotherhood have tracked me from one end of the globe to the other ever since. If I've escaped assassination

once by a hair's breadth, I've escaped it at least half a dozen times. Sometimes I'd throw them off the track for a while; always they picked it up again. And always there was the same letter of warning a day or two beforehand; then . . . a knife that just missed me, a rock that toppled over too soon or too late, a bullet that was deflected in some miraculous fashion. . . . Oh, I suppose I've had the most amazing luck, take it on the whole; and looking back on it, I can see now that, while I was just about as hard and reckless and bitter as a man could well be, when I left Madrid, those years spent chiefly in wild, uncivilized places, shooting and exploring, gave me back a more human outlook again. Nature's the finest of healing forces. You might say, perhaps, that the life I was obliged to lead was the saving of me in some ways, but it's been the hell of a life in others! D'you wonder when I got this amazing chance at last to be quit of it all and officially declared dead, that I grabbed at it? Can't you see what it meant to me, to be able to disappear, to start afresh under another name and to know that Clover's married life wouldn't be poisoned by that ever-present feeling of lurking danger?"

Duncan Fairlie had no difficulty in understanding it. His last scruples were satisfied. He was heart and soul now with this gallant masquerader whom those seven years had still left undaunted and cool enough to carry through so fantastic a scheme that its very daring had been, so far, in its favour. There must, he realized, have been something unusually fine and strong in a nature that had come through such an ordeal with unbroken nerve and sane outlook.

He listened now to Karslake's description of that fateful evening of the eighth of February, with the deepest interest.

The assailant, it seemed, had got into the conservatory

during the dinner hour and from there had slipped into the library and his final hiding-place in the embrasure of one of the further windows. Before Fairlie's interested eyes, his host briefly and dramatically enacted the whole scene, changing with lightning rapidity from one *rôle* to the other as he proceeded to illustrate every incident—the appearance of the man from behind the curtain, the struggle that followed, the spot from which he himself had fired, and the manner in which his antagonist had fallen, dragging at the curtain as he fell.

Fairlie sat, a silent and fascinated audience of surely one of the strangest little one-man dramas that was ever acted. In his absorption, the fact escaped him, even as it escaped Karslake, that Mrs. Ridgeway had forgotten, or hadn't thought it necessary, to put up the shutters behind the curtains.

But outside the window, a man who had leant against the wall for some moments, white-faced and shaken, was presently drawn back in a kind of hideous fascination to peer again through the gap in those curtains which had been left when Karslake relaxed his grip on them.

The moments passed and still he stood there. His expression of frozen horror changed to utter bewilderment and incomprehension. He was like someone who watches with his own eyes what every faculty in him but sight refuses strenuously to accept.

A ghost that walked—clean-shaven, as he had never seen its prototype in life—a ghost that held ordinary converse with a friend who was very certainly still alive, yet completely at ease in this phantom companionship! . . .

What did it mean? What *could* it mean. . . .

There followed slowly, very slowly, a dawning enlightenment; a piecing together of detached facts and hitherto undreamt-of possibilities, and then . . . Then, a storm of blinding, shattering rage—the terrible controlled rage

of a man who sees his dearest ambitions snatched from him by an ingenious trick, at a moment when all the decent rules that had governed his life hitherto had been sacrificed vainly to gain them.

If anyone who had known Nicholas Storrington—or believed themselves to know him as most people thought they knew that gay, serene personality, could have seen him at that moment, they might have looked, through those usually smiling blue eyes, into a very hell of deadly, vengeful hatred.

CHAPTER XXVI

INSIDE the library Duncan Fairlie was also piecing things together with very different emotions.

"I had had my usual warning, you see," Karslake explained simply, "and I was to a certain extent prepared. I'd got into the habit of always keeping a fairly big sum of money by me for emergencies; and I had the kit that I wore for that curtain-raiser at the Manor theatricals. It was merely a question of changing into that, of shaving off my moustache and making up a bit and catching the early train to London at Gatesby Station. The clothes of the other fellow I tied up and weighted and dropped in the canal just outside Gatesby. By the way, that reminds me"—he paused, the whisky flask suspended over the glass he was filling for his guest—"Why were there never any enquiries for that fellow? What the dickens did Storrington think had become of him?"

"Him? Who?" Fairlie jerked out the question blankly.

"Why, the fellow I shot. Never had such a shock in my life as when I recognized him. I'm hanged if he wasn't Storrington's stable-help and odd man. D'you happen to know how on earth my cousin got hold of him?"

Fairlie stared at him, for the moment almost incapable of speech. That the man who had tried to murder Karslake here in this very room, and who now lay buried in Danesthorpe churchyard, was actually the civil, unobtrusive individual he had so often seen about the Dower

House stableyard, was a piece of news that took him completely aback.

"But . . . that fellow was a Belgian!" he exclaimed blankly.

"Belgian be hanged!" his companion retorted. "He was pure Spaniard. Remarkably eloquent too, in his own language. He took it for granted that I wasn't armed, poor fool, and so he started off with an outburst of melodrama. His brother, I understood, was among the lot whom the police roped in eight years ago. That was the conversation Saunders heard. Rather one-sided it was! He'd brought his own weapon—it's in Gatesby canal, with the rest—but I suppose while he was hiding in here he took a fancy to using one of mine instead. Oh, he was Spanish all right. His facility with the knife would have proved it, even if his speech hadn't."

"Good Lord!" Fairlie fell silent, frowning, bewildered, vaguely uneasy as he took the glass the other had poured out for him. "You're sure he was Nick Storrington's man?" he asked presently.

"Dead sure; he *admitted* it. Bragged about having nearly got me twice before. I don't know when the second time was, but the first, I gather, was when I tried that chestnut of Storrington's and came such an imperial smash. It was this fellow who apparently put the wrong bridle on the brute."

"Yes, that's true; and Nick found it out and hurried after you to stop you."

Fairlie could scarcely have said why the certainty of that last fact afforded him such satisfaction. Somewhere at the back of his mind, something was disturbing him—some half-remembered incident in connection with this Belgian who turned out to be a Spanish criminal. . . .

"He wasn't in Nick's service when you shot him," he added slowly. "He'd left the Dower House that very

morning. Some unpleasantness with old Martin . . ."

"Oh, was that it?" Karslake let the question drop easily enough. Hadn't he experienced before how cunningly these avengers of "the Brotherhood" could worm themselves into places which gave them a chance to carry out their schemes? The man had come with forged credentials, no doubt.

"Talking about the Dower House," he said, "I'm going to make that over to Storrington as a gift, freehold, before the rest of the place is sold. Clover wishes it. She's fond of him, and he's been very decent to her through all this business."

"That's uncommonly generous of you," Fairlie commented.

"Oh, Clover will be giving it to him, in reality," the other said hastily. "It will be one of my wedding presents to her. But as far as Storrington is concerned, it's to be an act of sentimental quixotry on the part of an emotional widow who feels that her late lamented would have wished it." He grinned boyishly. "The Dower House and fifteen thousand pounds," he added. "I should have done it, in any case, if I'd stayed on here. As a matter of fact, the whole thing's undoubtedly been rough on Storrington."

"Morally speaking, yes," Fairlie agreed. "But legally and logically, no. By all the ordinary rules that govern these things you were the proper person to inherit. The grandson of the eldest son—one can't get away from that. Nick would be the first person to own that he hasn't any claim on you, whatever he may have had, morally, on old Robert."

"Anyhow, he'll be spared the awkwardness of thanking me," the other said lightly. "Because he won't know what I've done till I've left England. I shall carry the thing out at the last moment, through the lawyers. Stor-

rington knew me too well for me to risk another interview with him at close quarters."

"Well, I say it again: its damn generous of you," Fairlie repeated.

He wondered how many men in Karslake's shoes would have done the same.

True, fifteen thousand pounds wouldn't be very seriously missed, even with the addition of the death duties—ye Gods, the irony of it!—from the great bulk of the Danesthorpe fortune. The spurious widow would still have a very considerable income when the property was sold and the funds drawn out and invested abroad. True also that Juan Karslake was very much in love; and fifteen thousand pounds might seem to him not too big a price to pay for a whim of the girl he loved, even though the recipient of his generosity was a man who had blackened his character in the eyes of that girl—a man who disliked him.

A curious thing, that last. More curious still that no one had ever suspected it. Who would have given Nick Storrington credit for hiding his feelings so completely? Had he, then, known or guessed something—even before Sir Charles Haile's disclosures—about those old happenings in Madrid? Fairlie remembered that Nick had always upheld him in strongly opposing Benshaw's theory of a homicidal maniac. Could Nick possibly have had some inkling of the existence of the Brotherhood of the Scarlet Thumb, even before its agent struck?

Oh, ridiculous!

Yet, with a sudden flash of memory, there came back to him a conversation he had held with Storrington in this very library; a discussion about secret societies and their signs and emblems.

Which of them had led up to it—he or Nick? He searched his memory, that feeling of uneasiness which

had gripped him a little while ago reviving unaccountably. Yes, undoubtedly it *had* been Nick who had started the subject.

Had the "Scarlet Thumb" been mentioned between them? He fancied that it had; though at that time he himself hadn't known as much about that particular sect as he had learnt since. But that was long before Sir Charles Haile had unburdened his mind as to what he had heard of Juan Karslake. Then who or what had aroused Storrington's sudden interest in such an unusual subject?

Again, swift as a flash, an answer suggested itself; was it Bonnin—the *soi-distant* Belgian refugee? It was certainly just previous to this discussion that Bonnin had come to Danesthorpe. . . .

Steady . . . steady! His imagination was taking charge with a vengeance! The next thing he would be telling himself was that Nick had actually known, or suspected, what Albert Bonnin really was.

"Sometimes I almost felt that he *hated* me." Karslake's quiet, level voice echoed in his brain. Men did queer things when they hated.

Oh, damn it all! he must be going out of his mind. Storrington! cheery, genial, kind-hearted Nickie, the best of good fellows . . .

Duncan Fairlie pulled himself together with a mental shake. This ghastly, unnatural atmosphere of murder and deception was distorting his mental focus. As though Storrington would have kept the man a moment in his service if he had had the smallest suspicion . . .

Steady, again! Bonnin had no longer been in Nick's service on the night of the tragedy; he had left that very morning. Hadn't Nick said that he had telephoned from Hull?

Telephoned? How could Albert Bonnin have tele-

phoned from Hull when he was lying stone dead not half a mile away in the library at Danesthorpe Hall?

Pulses like engine pistons thudded suddenly in Fairlie's head—deafening, almost stunning him. He was beset by suspicions so hideous, so unbelievable, that his mind thrust them frantically from him; and for the rest of his nocturnal visit he kept them at bay, refusing to give them even a hearing, concentrating all his attention on the scheme which his companion unfolded for losing himself in America as the widow and reappearing later in his own person, but under another name. Clover and her aunt were to go out to South America in the autumn; the meeting place and the approximate date had been fixed between the lovers.

Fairlie found himself now charged with innumerable messages for Clover, and for once he grimly welcomed the substitution of this unaccustomed *rôle* of Cupid's messenger for his favourite one of sleuth. Always in the background hovered those dreadful suspicions, fluttering their black wings close to his head, ready to swoop down and settle at the slightest encouragement.

It was past two o'clock when Karslake let him out again by the conservatory door; and if it hadn't been for those flapping, hovering phantoms, he would have carried away a mind more or less at rest, not only in the knowledge—flattering to his self-esteem—that a clue, missed by everyone else, had led him to the solving of a most amazing mystery, but in a warm conviction of friendship strengthened and deepened and justified of itself. There was also the pleasant hope that some day in the future that friendship might be renewed under other skies.

But the phantoms refused to be driven completely away. They remained with him through the night. Next morning, from his window, he saw the big touring car

drive past Londonwards with the lawyer and his black-shrouded client, and breathed a sigh of relief and regret. He watched it out of sight, and *then* . . .

The black wings descended upon him at last, in a cloud. They would be disregarded no longer. That telephone message from a man who was dead . . .

Damn!

Duncan Fairlie wasn't the least given to unreasoning impulses; he ordered his life by rule and method. Therefore, even as he got into his two-seater and drove rapidly through the village, he wondered helplessly why he was doing this. What did he hope to gain by this early morning call at the Dower House?

He couldn't ask Storrington why he had made a statement that was so clearly a lie, since he could only prove that it was a lie by betraying his own knowledge of Bonnin's death. Yet he drove on, past the lodge gates, towards the big doors in the park wall outside the Dower House, where another car was waiting. He might have walked, instead of motoring—there was, after all, no hurry; but this morning, somehow, he preferred to drive.

Once or twice in his life before, Fairlie had felt that curious urge which was impelling him now. He couldn't have explained it, unless by the fact, against which his logical mind rebelled, that he had Highland blood in his veins, and possibly a touch of the second sight which sometimes accompanies it. Whatever it was, to-day it brought him to the garden gate of the Dower House, just as Dr. Richards emerged from the hall door.

"Hullo! anyone ill?" he asked as he got out. Richards was looking unusually grave.

"Nothing but what I've been expecting for some time," the Doctor said with the shortness that betrayed perturbation of mind. "Storrington's been over-doing it, and had a bad heart attack last night. He's in bed now, and I've

ordered him to stay there. He'll have all the old trouble over again if he isn't careful."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Fairlie said with genuine concern. "I suppose in that case I'd better not go up and see him?"

"As a matter of fact I'd rather he kept entirely quiet and saw nobody to-day," Richards said. "But he tells me that he's expecting Benshaw, the Police Inspector, and he insists upon seeing him. It seems that he was trying to telephone him up in the small hours of this morning, when this attack came on."

"Benshaw?" A quick stab of alarm shot through Fairlie. "What on earth did he want *him* for at that hour? Burglars, or what?"

"Heaven knows," the Doctor said with the irritable impatience of a medical man whose refractory patient is also his friend. "I imagine he must have been sitting up late as usual, working, and some notion struck him which he wanted to consult Benshaw about—probably some trespass or poaching law. Queer hour to ring the fellow up, though, as you say. Anyhow, Martin happened to be up too, looking after a sick animal. He and his wife got Storrington upstairs and put him to bed. Luckily Mrs. Martin knows how to treat these attacks, though he hasn't had one for years—not since he was a lad."

"And he sent for Benshaw this morning?"

"Yes; Martin rang him up after he telephoned to me."

"Ah. I think I'll go in and wait downstairs," Fairlie said, "until Benshaw comes. There may be something that I could see to for Storrington, since he's laid up."

"Well, don't go up to his room if you can avoid it," the doctor adjured him, "that's all."

He departed briskly, and Mrs. Martin, who had been hovering in the background, her usually cheerful face

grave and anxious, ushered Fairlie into the smoking-room and gave him a voluble account of last night's happenings.

"Mr. Nick," she said, "he's not been at all the thing lately. Not been sleeping well, he hasn't; worried-like, and no wonder. Last night he came home late, and did some work in the office; and then he went out into the garden instead of going to bed—I could see the end of his cigarette when he was walking up and down the lawn. After that I heard the gate click, and I knew he'd gone for a ramble in the park, like he's done time and again lately when he couldn't sleep. Well, that's bad enough, as you'd say, for a man that works like he does and gets up as early. He didn't ought to be out of bed after eleven, that he didn't. Then back he comes, and I ask you, sir, does he go straight up to his room? Not he. When Martin found him having one of his old heart attacks that I never thought to see him go through again" —Mrs. Martin's lament was piteous—"he'd been writing a note at his table in the office, I'll thank you! Writing . . . at that hour! It's fair crool, Major, the way he won't look after himself."

"It would certainly have to be an important letter that couldn't wait till the next day," Fairlie suggested gravely.

"You'd say so, sir; and this morning, first he said Martin was to take the car over to Gatesby and give the note to Mr. Benshaw; and next he said he was to telephone. 'Fussed,' he was, if you know what I mean. So Martin telephoned and Mr. Nick, he seems that impatient to see the Inspector that I wish to goodness he'd come and have done with it. Dr. Richards said particular as he was to be kept quiet. . . ."

She broke off, listening anxiously a moment. Then with, "Excuse me, Major, I'd better be getting through

some of my work before the Inspector comes," she bustled away.

Fairlie waited. As soon as her footsteps had died away in the back regions he was out of the smoking-room and standing by the writing-table in the little office. A sealed envelope lay on the blotting-pad, addressed to the Inspector at Gatesby, and he took it up and fingered it irresolutely. Those sinister phantoms were very real now and very close. The moment had passed for trying to drive them away, for condemning or exculpating. Rather it was the moment to ask oneself anxiously how far their power for harm existed. Could Storrington possibly have had any inkling of Fairlie's own visit to the Hall last night, and of the identity of his companion in that midnight sitting? This sudden eagerness to get in touch with Benshaw was ominous.

The front door bell rang, and before Mrs. Martin could answer it, he had slipped noiselessly out into the hall and was back in the library. He heard Benshaw's voice in the hall, but he didn't come out. The Inspector's heavy tread echoed on the creaking old stairs; he was being taken up to Nick's room.

Duncan Fairlie, his jaw grimly set, took from his pocket the envelope he had confiscated from the office table, and deliberately opened and read it. Forewarned was forearmed . . . at least.

It wasn't a very long letter, but it was terribly enlightening. Storrington's telephoning had evidently been an afterthought; this letter would have given Benshaw enough to act upon. And even now Benshaw was hearing the contents from Storrington's own lips . . .

Good God! what was that?

A sudden cry from upstairs; a sharp, anguished cry in a woman's voice. Fairlie thrust the letter into his pocket and hurried into the hall, just as Martin, looking

scared, appeared in his shirtsleeves from the back premises. Both men made for the staircase, then stopped, arrested by the appearance at the head of the stairs of the burly Inspector, awed, portentous.

"Mr. Storrington . . ." he began hoarsely, and then he was brushed aside by the agitated figure of the housekeeper, her apple cheeks blanched, and grief and horror in her eyes. Duncan Fairlie dashed upstairs and past her, waiting for no explanation. Even before he reached Storrington's room, he *knew*. It seemed to him that in some curious fashion he had known all this morning, although he hadn't realized his own knowledge.

Nicholas Storrington was lying back on his pillow as though he were asleep, but it was no transitory sleep that brooded over his motionless form. The strain of his excitement as he waited for Benshaw had done its destructive work, coming on the heels of last night's shock and the storm of violent emotion; and Fairlie knew it at a glance.

Yet with gentle hands and the deft, businesslike swiftness of a man who had come in contact with death not once but many times, he carried out the few simple tests that were needed to prove its presence.

Then he straightened himself and stood silently beside the bed looking down on that which had been Nicholas Storrington and was now an empty hollow shell. The real Nick Storrington had gone, slipped out and away from behind that still mask. The little cynical half-smile still lifted the corner of his clean-cut upper lip, but the serene blue eyes were closed. Fairlie lifted the cold, lifeless hand and held it for a moment or two in his warm clasp. His own eyes were moist.

To-day and yesterday, with their strange, sinister suspicions and discoveries, receded into the far background of his mind. This man had been his friend; he had been

a friend to most people who had known him . . . *who had thought they knew him.*

For who, after all, *had* known the real Nick Storrington? Was he smiling now—that little cynical smile of his—in some other world, at himself, at everyone, Fairlie wondered?

Back again they swept, those black wings—but now their pinions only beat to a great and aching pity for the man who lay there. A lonelier man, perhaps, for all his seeming frankness, his tremendous popularity, than that other who had lived for a short while at Danesthorpe Hall in an intangible isolation which the whole neighbourhood had recognized. Presently Fairlie came downstairs to find the Inspector still waiting in the hall, genuinely shocked and upset almost out of fortgetfulness of his original errand. Only once he alluded to it, as the other walked down with him to the gate.

"I suppose you don't happen to know what it was that poor Mr. Storrington wanted to see me about, Major?" he asked in subdued tones.

Duncan Fairlie shook his head.

"I haven't a notion," he said gravely.

. . . . . .

The Karslake vault was opened for the last time to admit a member of the family, when Nicholas Storrington was buried.

Officially, the line of Joshua Karslake—that hard-headed old captain of commerce and industry, who had bequeathed curious traits to some of his descendants, had ended with tragic swiftness in the sudden death of two kinsmen. The Danesthorpe murder slipped gradually into the records of unsolved crime, and Danesthorpe Hall, with its sinister associations, passed into other hands.

But in a far distant continent, a beautiful old Spanish-built house of the kind that Juan Karslake once described

to Clover Willoughby, enshrines a happiness as glowing and radiant as the sunshine that flecks the cool shadow of its *patios;* and in the veins of the little joyous dark-faced boy who plays about the fountains, the blood of old Joshua still runs.

His surname is a Spanish one—that small black-haired boy with the brilliant blue eyes—but his Christian name is Duncan.

Why not? Since his mother is British. She was globe-trotting, with her aunt and her big Alsatian dog, when that very charming South American who is now little Duncan's father met and fell head over ears in love with her at first sight.

In Danesthorpe, the Skipper will grumble to the end of his days that there is no accounting for women! Who'd have dreamt that Tom Willoughby's girl, having just recovered from one disastrous love-affair with a confounded Dago, would go and marry another?

And that fool Letty Cunliffe too . . . at her time of life, to cut herself adrift from all her friends and settle in a foreign country! and—damn it all!—not even to realize what a change for the worse she had made . . . !

"*Dear* Skipper!" coos Lady Angela Aylmer.

THE END

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